

AT THE PERIPHERY OF THE OIKOUMENE: THE HALAF AND UBAID 'BICHROME WARE' TRADITION IN THE LEVANT

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Los conjuntos cerámicos Halaf y Ubaid del Levante contienen pequeñas cantidades de cerámica con decoración policroma. Estas cerámicas, tales como las monocromas, se distinguen por su carácter "glocal" o exógeno. Aunque los mecanismos que condujeron a su difusión no han sido bien entendidos, su presencia debe ser concebida como una de las muchas manifestaciones producidas por las complejas interacciones que existen en la base de las extensas redes sociales y materiales Halaf y Ubaid.

Halaf; Ubaid; Levante; Redes supraregionales; Cerámicas policromas.

The Halaf and Ubaid ceramic assemblages from Levant contain small quantities of pottery with polychromous decorations with «glocal» character. Even mechanisms for its diffusion have not been fully understood, its presence must be conceived as one of the many products of the interaction complex which is at the base of the wide social and material halafian and ubaidian networks.

Halaf; Ubaid; Levante; Supraregional networks, Polychrome pottery.

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INTRODUCTION

Apart from the most spectacular finds like those from Arpachiyah, polychromatic pottery has never attracted as much attention as its monochrome counterpart. Most 'classic' Halaf and Ubaid assemblages, however, contain small quantities of polychromatic pottery alongside the commoner monochrome-painted ceramics. Like other Halaf or Ubaid pottery groups, Levantine 'Bichrome Ware' is distinguished for both its intraregional differences and cross-regional correlations. Its careful consideration, therefore, allows us to further explore through the glocal character of Halaf and Ubaid pottery, their technological, stylistic and social dimensions. This paper, offering an overview of the available evidence, outlines some of the basic issues and attempts to provide some pointers as to how and why these ceramic styles were adopted.

TECHNOLOGY

Basically, as known, three paint colours were used in decorating Halaf and Ubaid polychromatic pottery: black or brown, red and white, occurring in different shades according to the type of pigments, firing conditions and surface treatments. Based on the use of two or three colours for decoration, pottery is usually labelled respectively as bichrome or polychrome. The vast majority of ceramics are decorated with two colours, normally black or brown and red; bichrome painted decorations, however, can be applied on a white or light slip, which plays a part in determining the chromatic aspect of pottery (being lighter than or different from the clay body). Polychrome vessels are mostly found among assemblages retrieved to the east of the Euphrates (Breniquet 1996; Cruells 2013).

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The manufacture of bichrome-painted pottery can entail considerable expertise, since bichromy is often obtained in one single firing by varying the thickness of the aqueous slurries or iron-rich clays used as ‘paint slips’ and by alternating reducing with oxidising firing conditions (Noll *et al.* 1975)¹. Black colours, however, can be also obtained by using manganese or other heavy minerals. Manganese black can be fired in an oxidizing atmosphere and be easily combined with iron-oxide red to give bichromy, thus not requiring a change in the firing atmosphere nor higher temperatures (Noll/Holm/Born 1975; Robert 2010). Similarly, red colours can be also applied after firing (Matsun in Braidwood/Braidwood 1960, 201), making it easier to achieve the desired colour contrast.

Although analyses of the pigments used in decorating Halaf and Ubaid ceramics have been rarely undertaken so far (Gilbert 2004; Diebold/Speakman/Glascock 2005; Robert/Blanc/Masetti-Rouault 2008; Robert 2010; Gómez-Bach *et al.* 2012), an increase in the use of manganese or other heavy minerals for the black can be documented over time (Diebold/Speakman/Glascock 2005; Robert/Blanc/Masetti-Rouault 2008). According to some authors (Robert 2010), such use would have spread during the transition between the Halaf and Ubaid periods as a result of an Ubaidian technological ‘influence’. Far from representing a loss of knowledge, it would be due to a deliberate choice, in line with a broader tendency to rationalize pottery production including the use of vegetable temper, and the reduction and simplification of decoration (Akkermans 1988).

THE LEVANT AND THE HALAF AND UBAID PHENOMENA

The Levant, here subdivided into its canonical and geographical tripartition, is considered to lie outside the area where both Halaf and Ubaid ceramic traditions emerged. The mechanisms through which Halaf and Ubaid pottery diffused through the Levant remain little understood, and over-reliance on legacy data and gaps in our knowledge further obscure the picture. It can be said, however, that Levantine sites lay on the periphery of both Halaf and Ubaid *oikoumenai* or

socio-material interaction spheres. ‘Peripheral’ can be a highly connotative term, but its use in this paper denotes a factual occurrence rather than evoking a ‘core-periphery’ model with all the inherent implications in terms of asymmetrical interaction. Thus, although the label ‘Halaf/Ubaid-related’ adopted by many scholars to characterise Levantine assemblages containing Halaf and Ubaid pottery can find some justification in the “derivative” character of such components, those assemblages should probably be viewed as a peculiar expression of the broader Halaf and Ubaid phenomena, and, in the first place, considered in the very light of their spatial occurrence at the boundaries of both *oikoumenai* rather than being conceived in terms of presence/absence of the ‘core traits’ constituting the so-called Halaf or Ubaid ‘packages’.

THE NORTHERN LEVANT

HALAF BICHROME WARE

Available evidence indicates that the earliest Levantine bichrome-painted wares are found among Halaf-related ceramics at Ras Shamra in phase IVC (de Contenson 1992), namely in a context marked by the occurrence of important changes despite a certain continuity with the previous phase VAI. Phase IVC is characterized by the appearance of painted ceramics² as well as of other new types of pottery, like Red-Washed Ware or a finer, slipped ware reminiscent of Dark-Faced Burnished Ware of the Amuq phase C. Also, more complex forms come into use, and considerable effort seems to be put into decorating pottery: pattern-burnish decoration on fine Dark Faced Burnished Ware, sporadically present in the previous phase, reaches its peak in the IVC levels, and slipping and burnishing are much commoner than before. In general, compared to the past, the pottery assemblage exhibits a greater specialization, with a clearer association between fabric, shapes and finishing treatments.

De Contenson distinguished two different varieties of Halaf pottery, lustrous- and matt-painted wares, which were clearly differentiated in forms and the decorative repertoire. The first one is described as ‘particularly well-finished’, which, alongside the lustrous appear-

1. “The paint slips (consist) of clays that are either themselves naturally very rich in iron or were enriched by ferruginous earths. [...] The decisive difference between the two paint layers lies in their thickness, which is three to four times as great for the black as for the red layers. We thus have here a black/red painting which was fired by the iron reduction and reoxidation principle, the paint layer intended to remain black being protected against reoxidation simply by being made thicker” (Noll/Holm/Born 1975, 610-611). Black colours, however, can be obtained also by adding organically based pigments like charcoal (Diebold/Speakman/Glascock 2005).

2. The appearance of the Halaf-like painted pottery was preceded by that of the Orange Painted Ware (*poterie orangé peinte*), though in the final publication de Contenson preferred not to distinguish an earlier phase due to the light thickness of the level defined by the presence of such ceramics and attributed its materials to phase IVC (1992, I, 21).

ance of the paint, led it for long time to be considered as imported. Analyses carried out by Liliane Courtois (de Contenson 1992 I, 209-222), however, showed that this was not the case, just as for other lustrous-painted wares featured in the Levantine Halaf assemblages.

Bichrome-painted sherds are found among both ceramic categories, and also feature in a third, the yellow or creamy burnished pottery (*'poterie lustrée jaune ou crème'*), included by de Contenson among burnished wares in his final publication (notwithstanding its close similarity to lustrous-painted Halaf pottery)³. Bichrome pottery has a restricted form repertoire, comprising bowls and jars decorated with geometric or linear motifs. Lustrous-painted 'cream bowls' stand out for their peculiar characteristics: the flaring rim is nearly always decorated with triangles opposed by the vertices interspersed with series of parallel traits and separated by empty areas. Illustrated specimens, yellow or orange in colour, are burnished.

No quantitative information about bichrome pottery contained in phase IVC levels is available. Regarding lustrous-painted cream bowls, de Contenson said that the coexistence of black and red lines in the decoration was not rare, but, based on the frequency of decorative motifs (de Contenson 1992 I, 258-260, tab. 15 A-C), it would seem that bichrome sherds represented only a fraction of the painted pottery repertoire. In phase IVC (*ibid.*, 156-172), the pottery assemblages were dominated by the Red-Washed Ware, progressively increasing from 43 to 68%⁴. Halaf pottery never reached such percentages. The lustrous variant increased from 2.6 to 5.7% to drop at the end of the phase to 0.5%. The matt version, starting from 2% at the beginning of the phase, reached 15% by the end. Yellow or creamy burnished pottery accounted only for the 0.5% of the assemblage. Although Halaf matt-painted pottery was the third most abundant ware within phase IVC assemblages, at Ras Shamra Halaf pottery never reached the quantities attained in the Upper Mesopotamian Halaf sites, evidently playing a very different role. In such sites, Halaf pottery first flanked and then rapidly displaced most other ceramics, amounting up to 80% or even higher percentages of the assemblage, a phenomenon Olivier Nieuwenhuys described as 'painted pottery revolution' and

which entailed important modifications in ceramic technology, vessel shape and decorative style (2007). Interestingly, however, even in Upper Mesopotamia, Halaf bichrome pottery never occurred in greater quantities, particularly west of the Khabur (Cruells 2013).

Apart from Ras Shamra, so far bichrome-painted fragments have not been found among the Halaf ceramics at any other northern Levantine site. Likewise, no central Levantine sites have yielded bichrome pottery. Actually, 6th-millennium central Levant is still rather poorly known, but Halaf influence is considered to extend as south as 'Ard Tlaili in the Beqa'a (Kirkbride 1969), although Halaf pottery was not recovered at coastal settlements like Byblos (Dunand 1973), and a more northerly, inland site like Arjoune has actually yielded a very small amount of Halaf painted sherds (Campbell 2003)⁵. Of course, even if bichrome pottery has not been retrieved so far, it could have been sporadically present, but its absence has nonetheless to be evaluated in view of the progressively rarefaction of Halaf painted pottery moving from north to south. In the southern Levant, as first envisaged by Jacob Kaplan (1960), Halaf influence is evidenced by the presence of typical (or so alleged) Halaf forms among burnished rather than painted wares, and, based on the evidence from sites like Arjoune or Byblos, this seems to hold true for parts of the central Levant as well. In such areas, Halaf-like painted-pottery was manufactured only on a very limited scale or not at all, and possibly the rarer bichrome vessels were not even imported⁶.

'TRANSITIONAL' BICHROME WARE

A few post-Halaf northern Levantine assemblages include bichrome-painted pottery. At Tell Kurdu, in the Amuq valley, bichrome-painted sherds are found starting from phase D, which was defined by Robert and Linda Braidwood on ceramics grounds "as the range exhibiting wares in transition from the Halaf and Halaf-inspired families of Phase C to the 'Ubaid-inspired wares which appear in overwhelming preponderance in Phase E'" (1960, 157)⁷. The actual meaning of traditional terms like 'transitional', however, is being challenged

3. Bichrome-painted decorations, however, characterised another further category, the rare Corrugated Pottery (de Contenson 1992, II, fig. 191, 11).

4. At sites like Ras Shamra or Tell Kurdu, prehistoric levels were excavated by arbitrary levels (unless in the presence of discernible floor surfaces or architectural remains), and phases were distinguished based on pottery contained in such levels (de Contenson 1992; Braidwood/Braidwood 1960). The percentages provided in the final publications are therefore to be considered as indicative.

5. Recently, some Halaf/(Halaf-related?) sherds were also found in the Damascus basin, at Tell Baharia (Sulaiman 2012), and in the southern Levant, at Ein el-Jarba (Streit 2015).

6. With regard to Arjoune, where Halaf painted sherds make up 3,6% of the ceramic assemblage and include a restricted range of shapes, Stuart Campbell observes that "(i)t may be that either everyone in the settlement used painted pottery for specific functions on very special occasions or a smaller group of people used the decorated pottery for a similarly specific range of functions but on a more frequent basis" (2003, 36).

7. Phase D was isolated only in one trench, and "is represented by the smallest bulk of material from the most restricted exposure" (Braidwood/Braidwood 1960, 157). Even newer excavation, however, uncovered only pits that can be related to this phase (Yener *et al.* 2000).

by more recent studies. Stuart Campbell and Alexandra Fletcher (2010), for instance, warn about how the very use of the term structures our narratives, stressing that Halaf-Ubaid transition (HUT) could be a fictional phenomenon resulting from our poor chronological knowledge of the centuries at the turn of the 6th millennium⁸. But it is not only a matter of dating. Apart from the difficulties raised by qualifying materials as transitional unless in presence of hybrids – like those collected at Tell Aqab (Davidson 1977) or other northern Mesopotamian sites (Breniquet 1996) –, it now seems that some typical Ubaid traits occurred in firmly dated Halaf contexts at sites like Domuztepe, namely at a considerably early time and well beyond the alleged southern Mesopotamian Ubaid core area. This suggests that the genesis of the Ubaid phenomenon was indeed polycentric and long-standing, which would make the use of the term transitional rather problematic. Furthermore, at a site like Kurdu, in the ‘transitional’ phase D, there seems to be a stronger continuity with the previous rather than the following phase, as evidenced by the persistence of the Dark Faced Burnished Ware and similar unburnished ceramics, as well as by the fact that unpainted pottery still constituted most of the assemblage of this phase (approximately three quarters of the total selected sherd bulk).

Phase D levels contained different types of painted wares, whose amount never exceeded 10% and generally accounted for much lower percentages. The so-called ‘Transitional’ painted pottery was characterized by a beautifully executed and often intricately painted decoration, either monochrome or bichrome. Some sherds seem to be distinguished based on their very fine brushwork (‘Fine-line Ware’). Decorative motifs resemble Halaf ones, but the Braidwoods did not consider them to be specifically Halafian, and interpreted these kinds of wares as a sort of “*West Syrian experimentation with Halaf motifs*” (1960, 164). Indeed, even though these ‘transitional’ pottery groups could not be adequately classified due to their small numbers, according to the Braidwoods, they are mainly characterised by “*a sort of uniformity in the peculiar designs, which are neither proper Halaf, neither proper Ubaid*” (*ibid.*, 166, note 5). Anyway, ‘transitional’ painted pottery differs markedly from the Ubaid-like ceramics of the succeeding phase E, and it clearly precedes stratigraphically the ‘Ubaid-like’ wares, whose first (intru-

sive?) specimens appear only in the uppermost levels of phase D⁹. (Fig. 1)

Another northern Levantine site where levels traditionally attributed to the HUT have been found is Ras Shamra¹⁰. Here, in phase IVB (de Contenson 1992, I, 164-172), the variety detected in the preceding phase IVC is considerably reduced: Red-Wash Ware made up the vast majority of the ceramic assemblage, amounting to around 80%, whereas Halaf matt-painted pottery constituted nearly all the remaining 20%, with the lustrous-painted variant being barely present. The Halaf matt-painted pottery is considerably diversified. Despite the close similarity in form and decoration, two different pastes can be clearly distinguished: a lighter one, white-to-creamy in colour, and a much rarer, buff one, accounting for the 3.5% of the pottery. Alongside shapes inherited from the previous phase, new types of bowls and jars made their appearance. Closed vessels seem to increase in number and size. Bichrome pottery features some cylindrical, very elongated spouts and a lid.

Painted decoration is usually said to be monochrome, but bichrome sherds appear to increase. In most cases, vessels are painted black and red, but black-and-brown decoration is known. One fragment, which is distinguished for its complex ornamentation, bears two bands of white paint, whose usage at Ras Shamra is quite rare. Light-coloured slips are sometimes mentioned in the description of the illustrated sherds. Based on drawings and photos, the decorative repertoire, more varied than in the previous phase, shows some similarity to that of the monochrome-painted pottery. Different combinations of finely executed linear or geometric motifs (lozenges) are usually arranged in horizontal bands, but sometimes form rather complex patterns. A few so-called naturalistic motifs, like rosettes or eyes, are present. Bichromy seems to characterize the most complex painted designs. When vessel shapes can be recognized, a certain correspondence between form and decoration becomes apparent. As in phase IVC, bichrome motifs can decorate ‘Corrugated Pottery’ vessels. (Fig. 2)

In phase IVA (de Contenson 1992, I, 173-175), the preponderance of Red-Washed Ware increases even more, attaining 90% of the assemblage. Halaf matt-painted pottery decreases to 8%, but it is still the second

8. The Halaf-Ubaid Transition probably dates to ca 5400-5200 cal. BC, although its actual duration could be as long as 5500-5000 cal. BC, at least in Northern Mesopotamia (Campbell/Fletcher 2010).

9. Actually, as pointed out by the Braidwoods, “*the question occurs as to Phase E, that is, the ‘Ubaid period proper, should be considered to begin. The division is made more or less arbitrarily, at the 5.0 m in Kurdu trench I; above this ‘Ubaid types assume substantial proportions, and the more characteristics phase D elements disappear*” (1960, 168).

10. The chronological status of phases IV B and IV A is uncertain, but they are generally equated to the Amuq D phase on typological grounds (e.g., Schwarz/Weiss 1992), thus most probably falling within the 6th millennium BC.

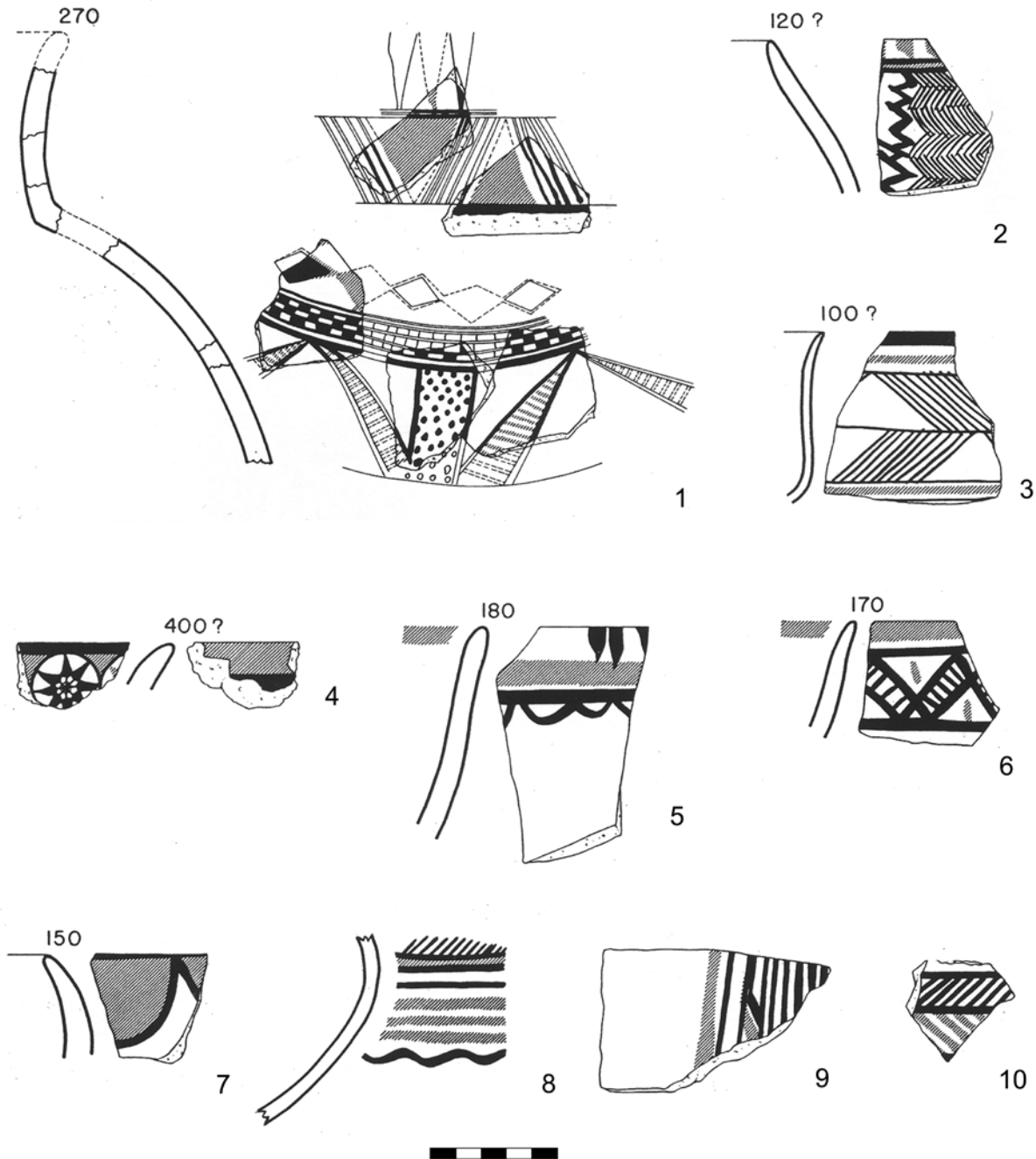


Figure 1. Tell Kurdu – Phase D: Transitional Bichrome Ware (left, above), Fine-Line Ware (left, below), Ubaid-like (right), Braidwood/ Braidwood 1960 (figs. 129.9-10, p. 165; 130, p. 166; 131.11-18, p. 167) (not to scale).

commonest category. According to de Contenson, there is little difference between this phase and the preceding one, but he believed that Halaf pottery underwent an impoverishment and a decline: decorative repertoire was less varied and motifs were often executed in a careless manner, sometimes without being bounded. He also reported that red-painted decoration and bichrome-painted decoration were abundant. Unfortunately, only a few painted sherds have been illustrated and none is bichrome.

UBAID BICHROME WARE

To the west, the diffusion of Ubaid/Ubaid-like pottery is considered to reach as far as the northern Levant: south of a line roughly stretching from Hama up to Ras Shamra, Ubaid pottery has indeed only been retrieved very sporadically, even though in the Homs region, where Chalcolithic evidence has generally proven to be elusive during reconnaissance survey, significant quantities of Ubaid pottery were observed at the SHR 094 site (Philip

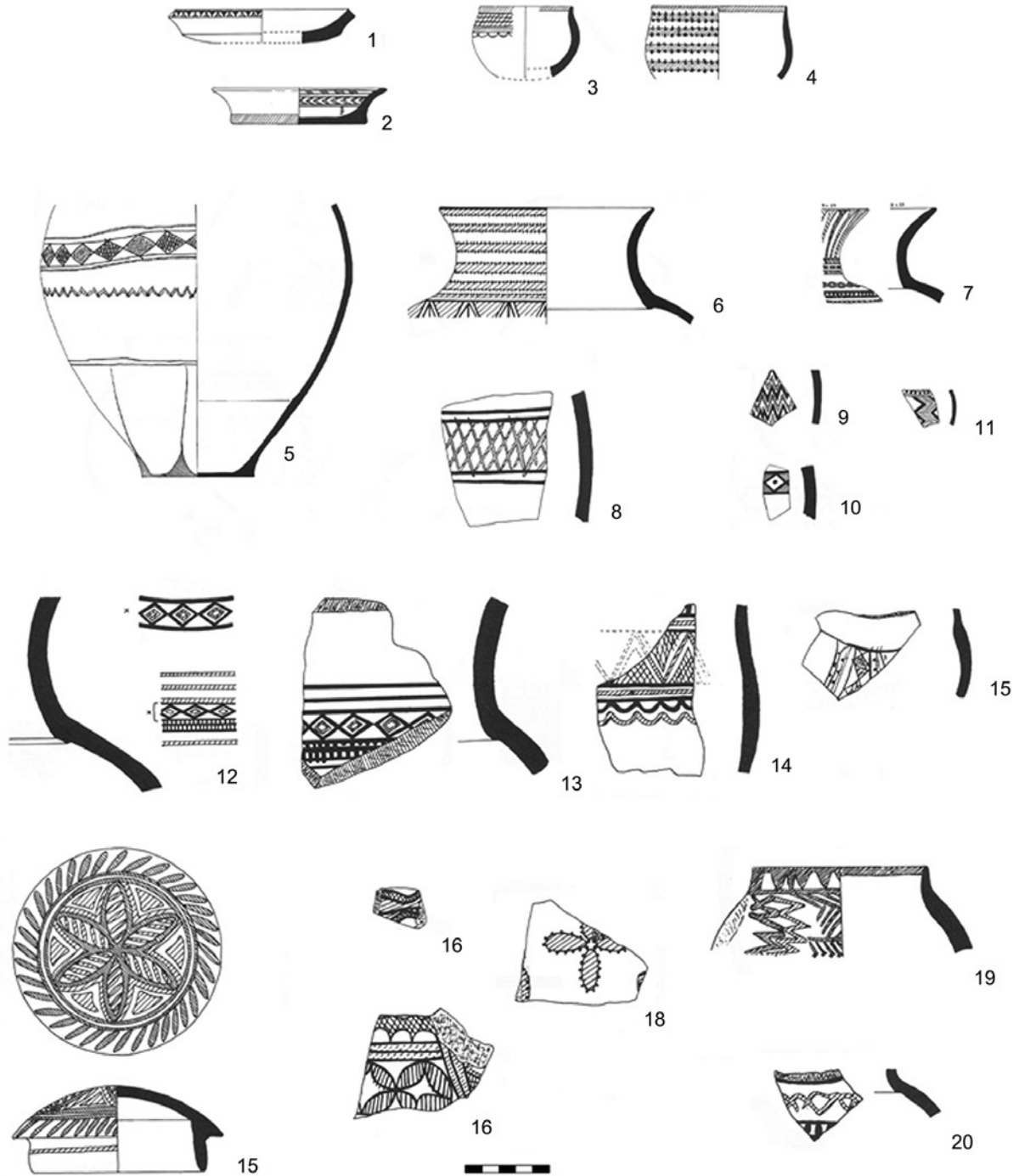


Figure 2. Ras Shamra – Phase IVB: De Contenson 1992 (figs. 207.1-2, 4, 6, p. 216; 208.3, 209.1, 3-4, p. 218; p. 217; 211.4-8, p. 220; 212.1, 5, p. 221).

et al. 2002). In the central Levant, however, the Chalcolithic period remains scarcely known.

At Tell Kurdu, phase E, whose latest levels are radiometrically dated to around 4800 cal. BC (Özbal 2010), is characterised by the appearance of substantial quantities of Ubaid pottery, alongside with a limited con-

tinuance of DFBW and related unburnished pottery (Braidwood/Braidwood 1960, 176-201). According to the Braidwoods, Ubaid monochrome-painted pottery made up three quarters of the assemblage, whereas the bichrome-painted version accounted for 1 to 5%. More recent excavations, however, although substantially confirming the validity of the typology worked out

previously, indicate that wares can occur at very different frequencies, also varying according to places (Diebold 2000). In trenches 11-15, for instance, the Ubaid monochrome pottery, accounts for 28% of the sherds, even though this percentage rises to 45% when only rim sherds are included in the sample. Quantitative data for bichrome-painted pottery are not still available, but this ware is relatively abundant in this area, being nearly all the bichrome recovered during the 1999 excavation season found here. This concentration seems to be related to the presence of a pottery workshop, which, with its four kilns, provides concrete evidence of specialized potting at the site.

In the Braidwoods' description (1960, 183, 186-201), bichrome-painted ceramics are characterized as having the same fabric as their monochrome counterpart. The paste, normally completely oxidized, has typically a buff colour turning either orange-buff or greenish buff. Surfaces, dull and smooth, have the same colour range as the paste but less intense, being normally light buff, slightly orange or greenish. The paint is dull, and there may be considerable colour variation in one brush stroke, due to the differences in the thickness of application and intensity of firing. Normally, the darker colour is a chocolate or greyish brown, while the red, mainly used as a filler, has a full red-orange tint. In about half of the specimens, red paint rubs off easily and was most probably applied after firing. As for the decorative repertoire, just like for the monochrome-painted pottery, the motifs are nearly always non-representational and can be called geometric only in a rather loose way. The main tendency is to stress the horizontal, by various types of banding and various means of emphasizing the bands. Decoration is generally confined to the upper part of vessels, which is further emphasized by the presence of a band of paint on or near the lip.

The Braidwoods found two different kinds of bichrome-painted pottery, concentrated respectively at the bottom and at the top of the deposit. About half of the sherds from the deeper range have the same chalky, white slip born by the (possibly intrusive) Ubaid-like fragments retrieved in phase D¹¹, while the most recent ones are unslipped with painted decoration covering a much wider area. The occurrence of different qualities of bichrome ware has been confirmed by the new excavations. The finest type, comprising sinuous-sided bowls and cups, is often white-slipped and decorated with motifs carefully outlined with thin, black

lines; the lesser quality one, having generally orange fabrics and being often shaped into globular jars with ring bases, is decorated with broad strokes of paint on untreated surfaces, and with motifs barely constrained or not at all by rough black outlines. Benjamin Diebold observed that, unlike the Braidwoods suggested in their report, the first type would be later in date than the second, thus indicating the existence of either two distinct bichrome traditions or, alternatively, two modes in the popularity of a single bichrome ware (2000, 61). Yet, it can also be observed that, apart from the lack of slip, the bichrome sherds retrieved by the Braidwoods in the upper levels of phase E seem to have, as they wrote, a much larger decorated surface than the earliest ones, and that some bowls decorated with relatively elaborated, 'bold' patterns come from the uppermost levels, when multiple-brush and coarser monochrome-painted designs prevailed¹². Even if at present it is not possible to satisfactorily match old and new finds, Kurdu's bichrome-painted pottery (or, at least, a part of its production) would seem to have become a finer and finer item compared to its monochrome counterpart. Such a diversification would seem to indicate that, even if Ubaid-like monochrome pottery was undergoing a process of 'simplification', bichrome ceramics kept their role of luxurious pottery or "good dishes". (Fig. 3).

Early Ubaid-related material comparable to that of Tell Kurdu has been found at Ras Shamra in phase III C, but, according to de Contenson, bichrome pottery was absent. In the following phase III B, whose abundant painted ceramics are considered to resemble more closely late northern Mesopotamian Ubaid types, bichrome-painted sherds are rare (amounting only to 1% of the material recovered in the sounding SH), and are decorated with rather simple combinations of linear and geometric motifs. A similar, simple ornamentation is found also at Hama, where bichrome-painted pottery was never characterized by complex patterns. (Fig. 4).

At Hama (Thuesen 1988), bichrome-painted sherds are found among both medium and coarse ware groups. Coarse bichrome pottery is closely related to the other coarse wares except for the two-colour decoration; its fabric, tempered with organic material, has a colour most commonly ranging from reddish to brownish shades, and normally a white slip or wash covers the exterior of vessels. Medium ware specimens have a mineral-tempered paste, reddish yellow or pale brown

11. See note 7.

12. The quality of the Ubaid-like monochrome-painted sherds recovered in trench 14 during the 1999 excavation season is 'noticeably higher', both in terms of the execution of decoration and fabric, than that of those collected in the later trench 11/15. Such a difference seems to be mirrored by the finds of the 1998 campaign. Although more work is needed to confirm its validity, the difference existing between the two assemblages would allow for the possibility of an internal subdivision of phase E (Diebold 2000, 62).

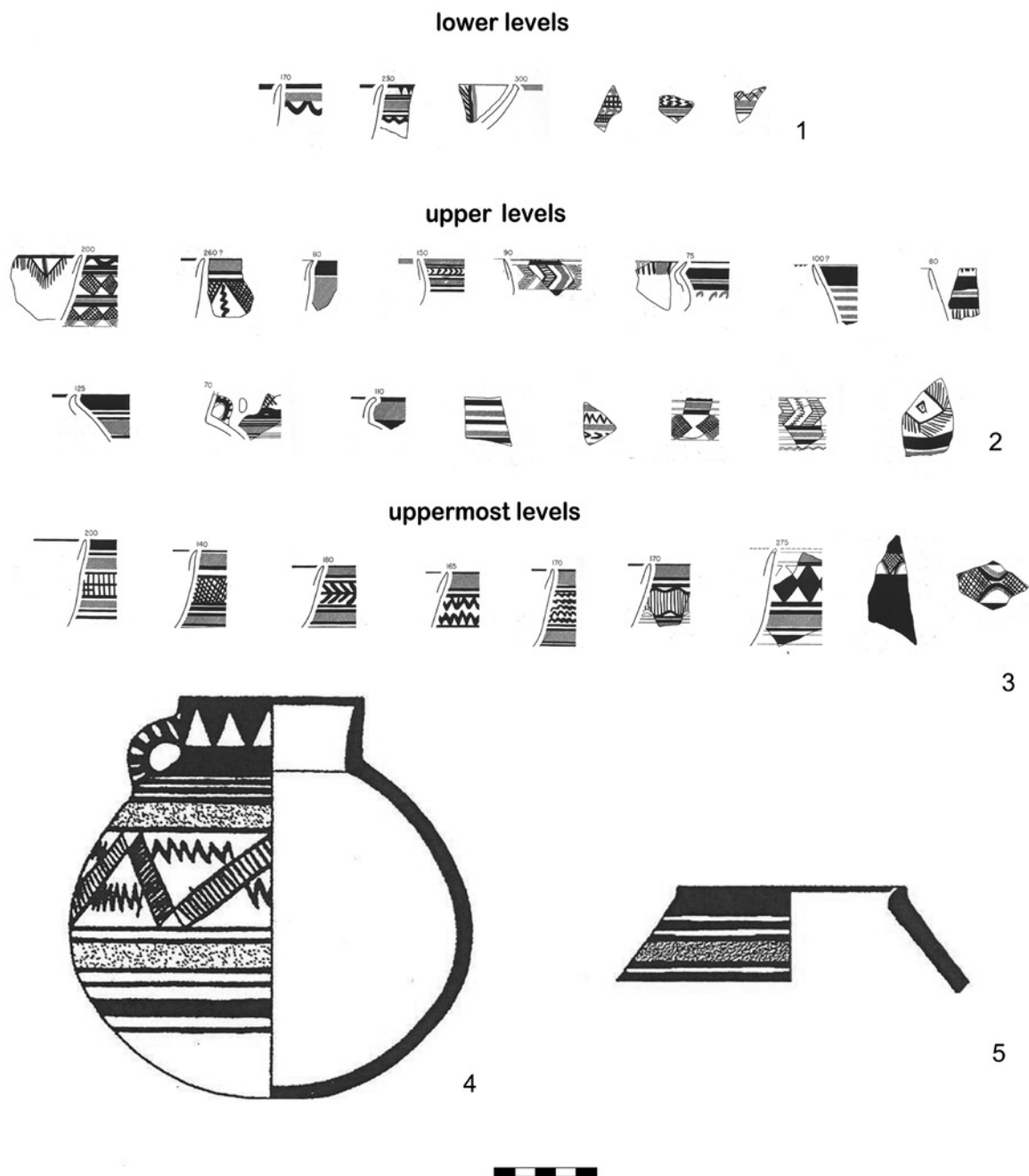


Figure 3. Tell Kurdu – Phase E: Ubaid-like Bichrome Ware, new excavation (left, Yener *et al.* 2000, fig. 14, p. 107), Braidwoods' excavation (right, Braidwood/Braidwood 1960, fig. 158, p. 202) (not to scale).

in colour, and are slipped on both the exterior and interior surface. Frequency data are not available, because about 90% of the sherds whose provenance was recorded can be referred to decorated vessels, but the medium type is reported to have a low representation throughout the period, while the coarse variety increased over time, given the progressive shift towards an inventory dominated by bigger shapes (a fact that seems to indicate that a change in the practices of commensality took place).

Bichrome decoration appears on bowls and jars; all the pottery is modelled with the help of a rotary device of some sort, most probably a slow wheel. Unlike monochrome-painted ware, paint is always matt. In the earliest strata of phase L, decoration is characterized by a combination of triangles, lozenges and cross-hatching; medium ware carinated bowls are considered to be a fossil type. Later, wavy lines (sometimes traced using a multiple brush) make their appearance and become increasingly common.

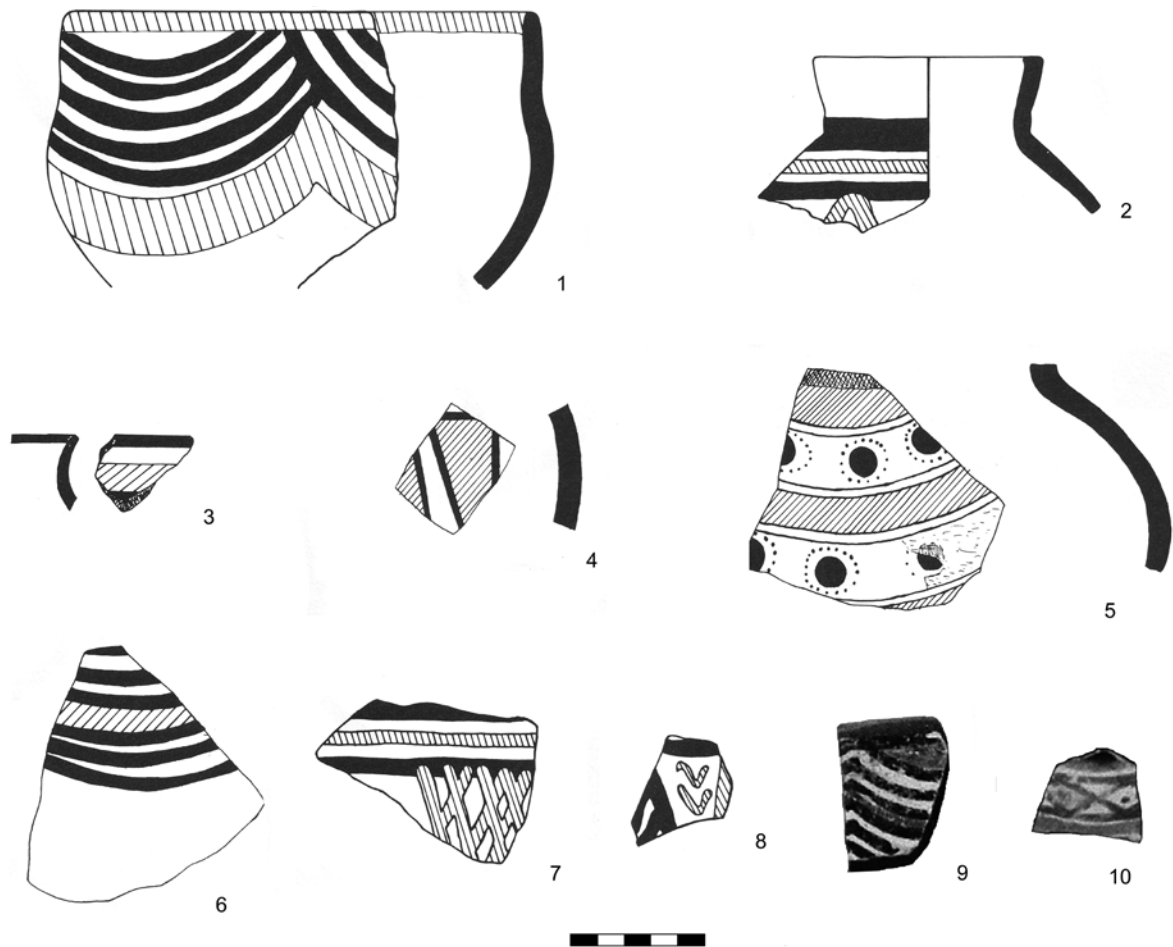


Figure 4. Ras Shamra – Phase III B: de Contenson 1992 (fig. 228, p. 237).

The earliest levels of phase L are traditionally attributed to the HUT based on typological grounds (e.g., Schwarz and Weiss 1992). At Hama, however, unlike at other northern Levantine sites, painted pottery and Dark Faced Burnished Ware do seem never to have coexisted, which would lead to think of a somewhat later date. According to Ingolf Thuesen, Kurdu's phase E would offer the best parallels to phase L, and in particular bichrome-painted ceramics would show some affinity with the earliest bichrome pottery of phase E. Yet, as for other northern Levantine assemblages, the decorative repertoire of painted pottery has a background in original Halaf motifs (1988, 92), which is certainly more evident in the less recent specimens. (Fig. 5).

Ubaid-related painted pottery was recovered at other northern Levantine sites, like Tell Sukas (Oldenburg 1991), Tell Daruk (Oldenburg/Rohweder 1981) or Tell Afis (Giannessi 2004), but bichrome-painted sherds are extremely rare, and decoration is limited to bands of different colours or very simple patterns.

NORTHERN LEVANTINE BICHROME WARE, IN SUM

Despite a certain degree of variability, northern Levantine bichrome-painted ceramics are distinguished by the same basic traits (a red- and black-painted decoration usually confined to the upper part of vessels; a rather restricted set of mostly geometric or linear motifs arranged in horizontal bands; a whitish/light-coloured slip or untreated background; the nearly exclusive use of black paint for contour lines; small to medium shapes – mostly bowls and jars – suitable for displaying, serving and consuming food; mineral temper...), and, although a chronological discrepancy might be implied by the modes and tempo of the exchange/transmission, there seems to be a certain parallelism in their evolution.

Bichrome-painted vessels made their first appearance during the Halaf period, but they were much more numerous and widespread in the subsequent phases. Their numbers, however, seem to remain lower by

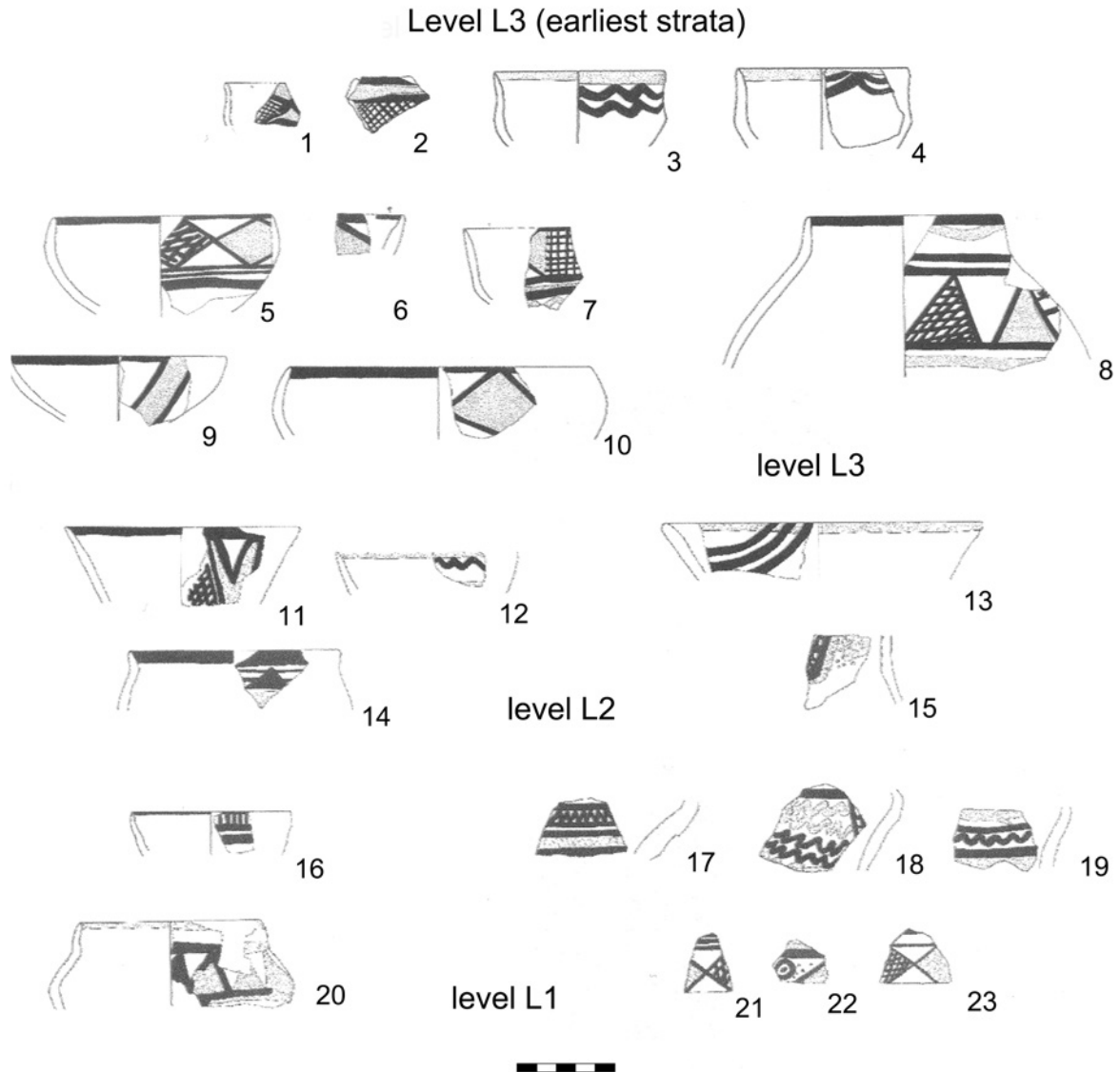


Figure 5. Hama – Phase L: Thuesen 1988 (pls. IV.9, p. 216; V.3, p. 217; VIII.8, 11, p. 220; XII.7, p. 224; XIII.8, p. 225; XV.4, 13, p. 227; XX.3-4, 7, p. 232; XXII.2, p. 234; XXIII.5, p. 235; XXIV.5, p. 236; XXV.9, p. 237; XXVI.4-5, 7, p. 238; XXVII.3, 6, 9, p. 239) (not to scale).

comparison with their monochrome counterparts, and are not at all comparable to the amounts reached at more eastern sites like Tell Masaik during HUT times (around one third of the assemblage, Robert/Blanc/Masetti-Rouault 2008). Moreover, appreciable quantities of bichrome pottery have been found only at major sites, although this could partly be a matter of chronology and/or extent of the investigation.

The earliest examples are generally more finely executed; later, unslipped specimens become increasingly

common, as well as a less elaborated and more careless decoration including new motifs like wavy lines. In general, decorative styles show a tendency to gradually evolve toward plainness, which, as already mentioned, might correspond to the inception of a more standardized vessel production, according to a process described in broader terms as the 'evolution of simplicity' by David Wengrow (2001)¹³.

Bichromy characterizes nearly exclusively Halaf- and Ubaid-related pottery. Even though close parallels

13. According to Wengrow (2001, 181), after an unprecedented phase of elaboration and experimental design which took place in the (6th millenni-



Figure 6. Tsaf Ware (after Bar-Yosef and Garfinkel 2008, Fig. 224; photo D. Harris, courtesy of Tel Tsaf expedition).

cannot be found in most instances, forms and the decorative repertoire, just like for the monochrome-painted ceramics, are clearly drawn from the broader Halaf and Ubaid traditions of Upper Mesopotamia, and, as in the northern Ubaid, the weight of the Halafian heritage appears to be rather marked, being still discernible in the HUT and early Ubaid pottery. Certainly, from a decorative point of view, every community seems to “speak its own dialect”, and, although variations are sometimes subtle, we cannot say if similarities in decorative patterns and motifs conveyed the same meanings for different communities. Most decoration is geometric and abstract (Campbell 2010), and some motifs could have spread just because they could be easily re-contextualized and re-conceptualized (Cohen 1985). The emphasis, however, seems to be placed on sharing a common identity.

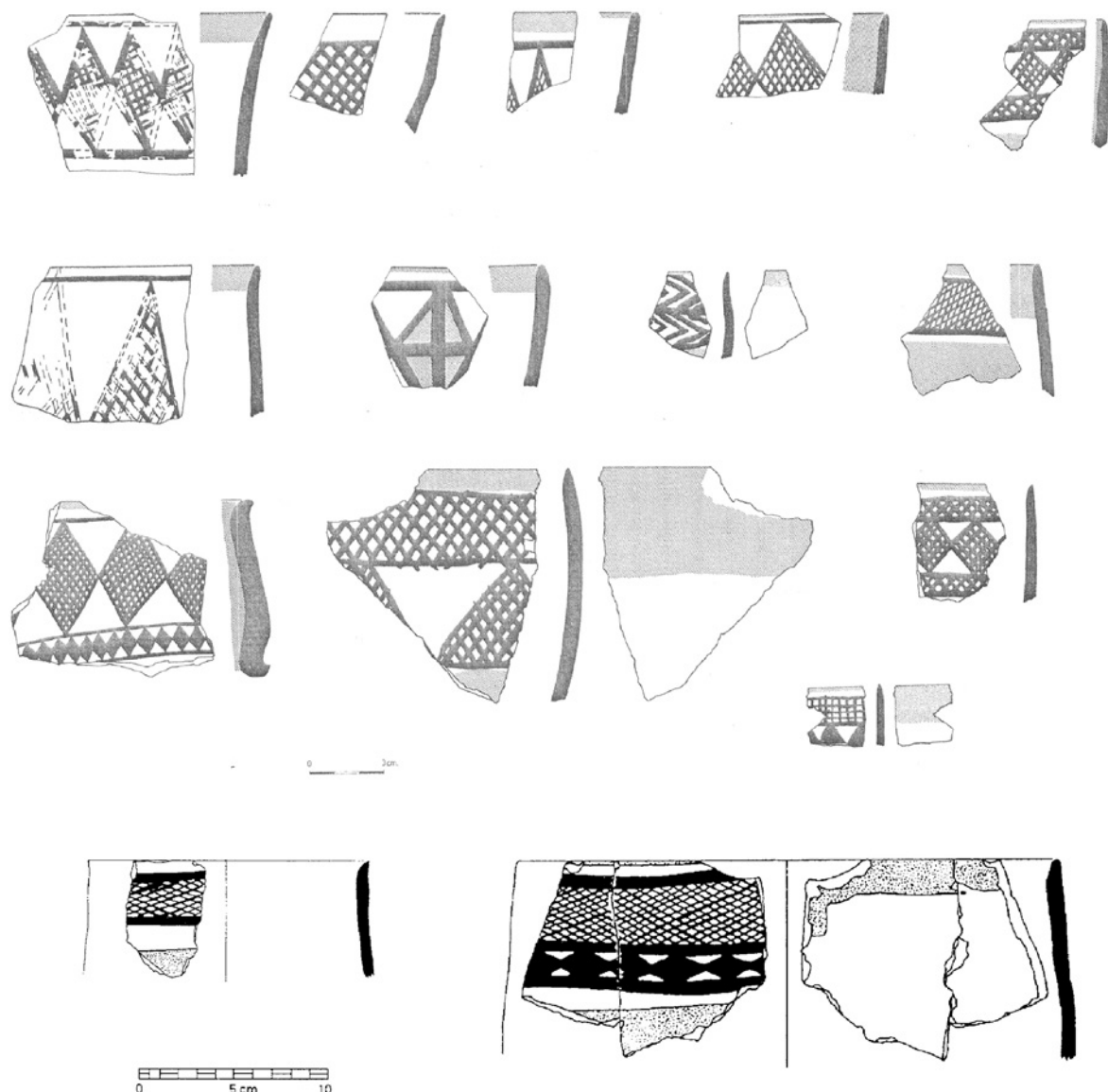
THE SOUTHERN LEVANT: TSAF WARE

First identified in the late 1970s at the eponymous site located on the west bank of the Jordan river and radiometrically dated between ca 5200 and 4750 cal. BC (Streit/Garfinkel 2015), ‘Tsaf Ware’ is a rather peculiar kind of decorated pottery. It is characterised by horizontal bands of geometric motifs (net-filled rhombi or lozenges, net patterns, filled rhombi or triangles, fish-bone patterns) painted in black on a smoothed (usually) white-slipped surface¹⁴, which appear on the upper part of vessels (mainly fine ware bowls and amphoriskoi). Below the design, the vessels are covered by a red slip/paint, and a red band is generally painted along the outer and inner rim (Gophna/Sadeh 1988-1989). (Fig. 6).

Tsaf Ware appears to be the earliest example of polychromatic pottery occurring in the southern Levant. Here, although painted pottery presents a very long tradition from the very first widespread use of ceramics, neither Halaf nor Ubaid black-on-buff decoration were ever adopted. The Wadi Raba assemblages, dating between 5800 and 5200 cal. BC and therefore roughly contemporary to the Halaf ones further north, only in-

um) Halaf period, “the simplification of pottery designs began throughout Mesopotamia during the fifth millennium [...], and reached its peak with the onset of urbanization during the fourth millennium. Throughout the vast network of Mesopotamian villages, the form of painted vessels became markedly less diverse and ornamental designs were reduced to concentric bands filled with simple rotary patterns”.

14. One unique fragment bore the depiction of a flying bird (Streit/Garfinkel 2015, 866).



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Figure 7. Tsaf Ware: Tel Tsaf (above, Gophna and Sadeh 1988-1989, fig. 6.1-4, 8-10, 13-14; 7.1, 4-5, 13; 8.2), Kataret es-Samra (below, Leonard 1989, Figs. 6.5, p. 8; 5.4, p. 7).

clude very few painted sherds. Only at the end of the 6th millennium painted pottery undergoes a resurgence in the southern Levant.

Tsaf Ware has a rather restricted distribution. So far, the only other site apart from Tel Tsaf to yield an appreciable quantity is Kataret es-Samra, which lies on the opposite bank of the Jordan. Other few finds, known from the excavations conducted at other southern Levantine sites (Tell esh-Shuna: Gustavson-Gaube 1986; Gibson 1994; Abu Hamid: Lovell/Kafafi/Dollfus 2007; Tubna: Banning/Blackham/Lasby 1998; Banning 2007; Abu Habil: de Contenson 1960; Leonard 1992; Tell el-Mafjar: Anfinset *et al.* 2011), all dating between the very end of the 6th and the half of the 5th millennia cal. BC, seem to attest

certain variability, but their often inadequate characterisation and, above all, the paucity of data do not allow us to get a clearer picture.

Petrographic analyses have indicated that Tel Tsaf pottery was “produced from raw material easily accessible to the inhabitants of the site” (Gophna/Sadeh 1988-1989, 31, note 6). Even if at present it is not possible to identify any precise manufacturing centre or place, it seems quite reasonable to assume that Tsaf Ware was produced somewhere in the northern or central Jordan Valley, as its rather circumscribed diffusion and uneven distribution would confirm. But, though locally manufactured, Tsaf Ware is a foreign-inspired production, as was noted from the very early days of its discovery

when it was compared to Halafian wares, given that elaborately painted pottery is rarely found in the southern Levant (Gophna/Sadeh 1988/89; Leonard 1989). Radiometric evidence, however, has now shown that Tsaf Ware is in fact chronologically related to northern Levantine Ubaid assemblages or to those contained in the so-called Halaf-Ubaid transitional levels, as Albert Leonard (1989) already suggested on a stylistic basis, although very close parallels cannot be found¹⁵. (Fig. 7)

Tel Tsaf lies far beyond the southern limit of the Ubaid *oikoumene*, but here four Ubaid sherds were collected during the 2005 and 2006 excavation seasons. According to the excavators, they find comparisons with types of Ras Shamra's level III B and are imports from the northern Levant (Garfinkel *et al.* 2007). Even if phase III B is almost certainly to relate to a time later than the initial occupation at Tel Tsaf, their presence could hint to the existence of contacts linking the Jordan Valley and the northern Levant, as also indicated by the unusual occurrence of artefacts like obsidian tools, seals and tokens. This is surely a fact worthy of note since Tsaf Ware bears some similarities to the northern Levantine bichrome-painted pottery: the presence of the Ubaid fragments makes it rather likely that Jordan Valley people were aware of this kind of polychromatic decorations. However, the striking fact is that it was *this* kind of pottery that inspired a local production in the southern Levant instead of the less elaborated and commoner black-on-buff (Halaf/Ubaid) ceramics.

We do not know if the Jordan Valley communities looked at bichrome-painted ceramics as a rarer and/or more exotic (and therefore more valuable) item, but, evidently, they considered them as more suitable to their taste and needs. Thus, they chose to imitate a very distinctive type of pottery, working out their own version based on a very limited set of decorative patterns and motifs drawn from the Halafian/Ubaidian tradition. Such a simplification is not unknown among HUT/early Ubaid bichrome-painted pottery, as already evidenced for instance for Hama, and indeed it is in line with the general trend towards the plainness of decorative styles previously mentioned. Tsafian ceramics, however, most closely resemble some (HUT/Ubaid) monochrome-painted pottery recovered at the Syrian site of Tell al-'Abr in levels 7-6 (Hammade/Yamazaki 2006).

Levels 7 and 6 (Stage I), dated to the last centuries of the 6th millennium cal. BC, contain a large amount of painted pottery (90% of the diagnostic sherds), which is characterized by the presence of Halafian decora-

tive motifs applied to the 'Ubaid' fabric. The excavators, however, believe that, even if "*such specimens fall into the 'Halaf-Ubaid transitional' category, [...] Stage I material reveals more Ubaid-based features*" (Yamazaki 2010, 320). Bichrome-painted sherds are quite rare, but monochrome-painted bowls and jars are most frequently decorated with motifs based upon cross-hatching (single or multiple bands, lozenges...), placed close to the rim or in the upper part of vessels. More generally, painted ceramics are distinguished for the simplicity and repetitiveness of many of the decorative motifs, which are nonetheless very carefully executed¹⁶. (Fig. 8)

Tell al-'Abr is situated in the upper Euphrates Valley, at some 550 km of distance from Tel Tsaf as the crow flies, and further strict comparanda cannot be found at any sites lying in the area between the two (apart from a few occurrences, like at Tell Kurdu). Certainly, at present, it is difficult to say which decorative patterns and motifs were in use during a specific time in the vast HUT/Ubaidian *oikoumene*, and maybe some of them could have had a wider circulation than can be discerned based on the available finds. It is therefore impossible to ascertain whether the resemblance in question is due to more or less direct contacts between the two areas and/or chronological proximity rather than mere chance, and, actually, Tsafian ceramics are the unique instance so far known of Levantine bichrome pottery with the vessel's external lower part covered by slip/paint. Nevertheless, it must not be forgotten that in the southern Levant bichrome-painted decoration does not occur at all during the Pottery Neolithic and is still rare in the Chalcolithic, and it is exclusively associated with patterns and motifs belonging to the broader Halafian/Ubaidian decorative repertoire. The appearance of bichrome-painted decoration seems thus to represent a real novelty, which further witnesses the occurrence of relationships with the territories that are sited to the north.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The eye-catching visual aspect of bichrome-painted pottery made it worth investing extra labour in its manufacture, though it was produced only in limited quantities. Just like for its Halaf and Ubaid monochrome counterparts, based on vessel forms and bold decorations, the use of bichrome pottery can be related to the display, serving and consumption of food. The lack of precise contextual data means it is not possible to

15. "[This kind of] fine ware does not (nor probably should it be expected to) fit neatly with material from either Amuq phase C (Halaf) or Phase E ("Ubaid") horizon; yet it does seem to be part of the same cultural milieu (...), demonstrating an artistic tradition that seems more at home in Syria during Amuq Phase D" (Leonard 1989, 11-12).

16. A similar decoration is also known from the coeval and nearby site of Tell Kosak Shamali (Nishiaki *et al.* 1999; Nishiaki 2016).

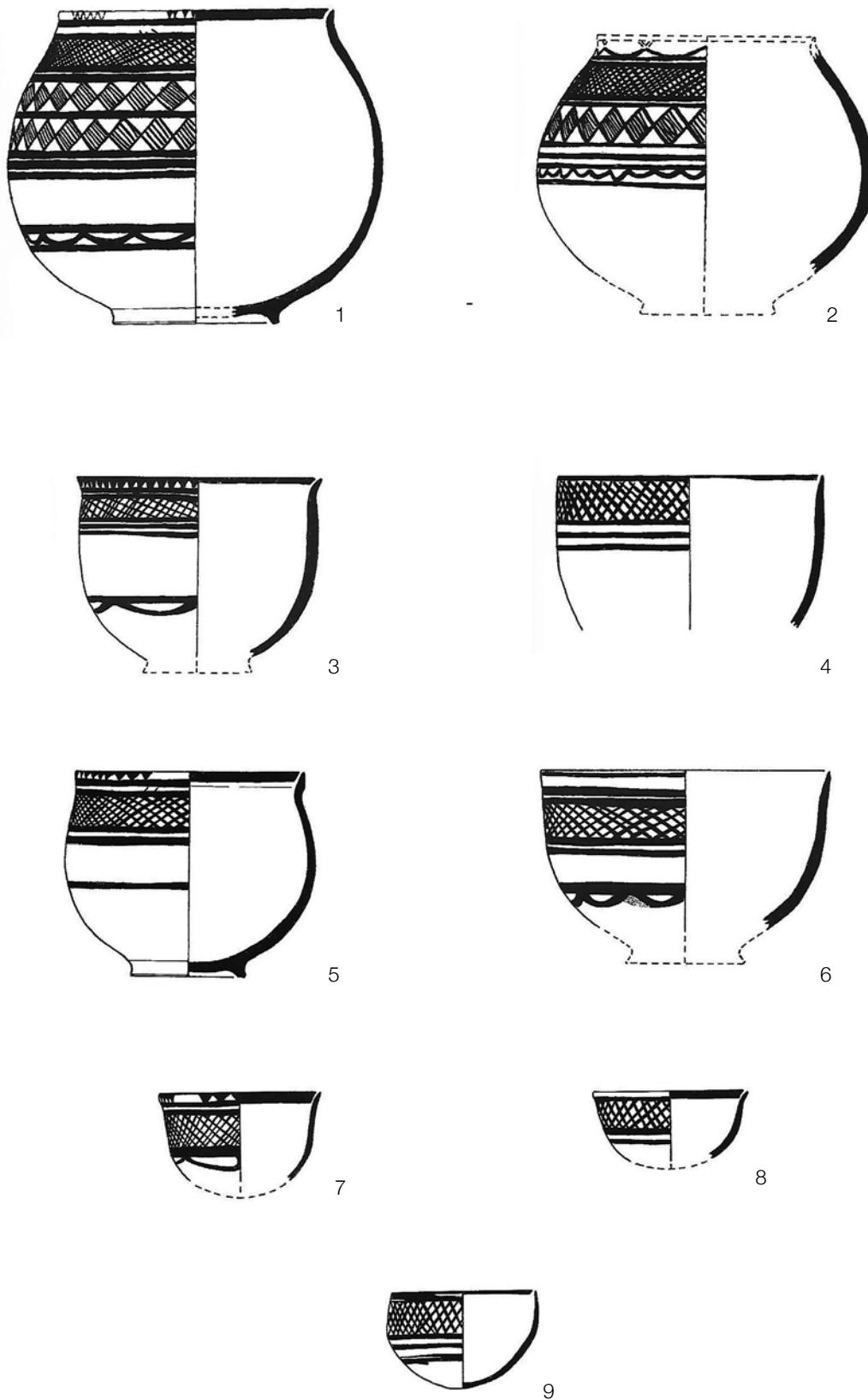


Figure 8. Tell 'al-Abr – Ubaid Monochrome-Painted Ware, Stage I (Hamade/ Yamazaki 2006, pls. 6.1: 2, 3, 6; 6.3: 4; 6.5: 2, 4; 6.10: 7-8, 10) (not to scale).

more precisely denote the contexts of commensality, and to ascertain whether there was a difference in the use of bichrome and monochrome ceramics. In fact, we do not even know if such vessels could have made up some sort of standardized dinner set (possibly also comprising elements made up of perishable materials), which mirrored convivial and/or ritual habits.

Although we do not know whether the import or the production of Halaf- and Ubaid-related painted pottery entailed the adoption of specific habits, food-related practices, either daily food consumption or special feasts, certainly played a significant role in building and reproducing social relations (e.g., Pollock 2010). The symbolic and ritual dimension, always so difficult to investigate, lies at the very core of these processes, and the appearance of painted pottery has certainly opened up a wide array of novel possibilities for *"the creation, negotiation, and contestation of identities, social norms, the construction of personhood and prestige, and the exercise of social and economic control"*. As remembered by Philip Karsgaard, painted ceramics, just like all 'meaningfully constituted' material culture, *"are meaningful in ways that are not reducible to their being epiphenomena of their particular technologies of manufacture"* (2010, 51).

Nevertheless, the role played by technology in the diffusion of painted pottery cannot be underestimated. As demonstrated by Michela Spataro and Alexandra Fletcher (2010), the spread of Halaf painted pottery entailed the use of a common formula or 'recipe' for the preparation of the clay paste: interregional contacts appear to have structured potting activities over a wide area, showing once more how technology can contribute to the establishment of extended communities of practice. A technological transfer of some sort must be presupposed also in the case of bichrome-painted pottery, a technically specialized product whose manufacture involves the use of technologies clearly differing from the Levantine autochthonous traditions.

The sharing of both technological knowledge and beliefs or, at least, of decorative patterns and motifs must have made the adoption of Halaf and Ubaid painted pottery highly desirable, as testified by its widespread diffusion. Available evidence rarely allows us to reconstruct the contexts of production of such pottery in detail, but we do not have evidence of mass pottery circulation, and local production is to be posited in most cases. Although the data indicating the provenance of Levantine bichrome ceramics are quite limited, the fact

that they display peculiarities despite their small quantities and that they often appear to be related to local monochrome-painted wares, strongly suggests that most of them too were manufactured locally.

Local production, far from being a mechanical replication, implied a selective adoption and reworking of traits. This is a phenomenon very well known for both the Halaf and Ubaid interaction with regard to the appropriation of foreign/external traits, which is indicative of the complex and diverse mechanisms that such interactions entailed. The glocal character of Halaf and Ubaid pottery reflects the multiscalarity of interaction spheres or socio-material networks. Halaf and Ubaid *oikoumenai* can in fact be appropriately conceived in the first place as interaction spheres or socio-material networks identified by the diffusion of related pottery¹⁷. After all, as observed by Robert Carter and Graham Philip regarding Ubaid horizon, *"pottery is the single factor found in all assemblages that have historically been described as"* such (Carter/Philip 2010, 3).

Yet, although at least partially explained by the patchiness of evidence, the uneven distribution, both in spatial and quantitative terms, of the Halaf- and Ubaid-related pottery in the Levant raises the question of the mechanisms of their diffusion. It must be considered that their progressive rarefaction takes place within an area characterized by a rather substantial degree of homogeneity from the point of view of ceramic production, as showed by the spread of Dark Faced Burnished Ware, Red-Wash Ware and related pottery. Furthermore, (Halaf/Ubaid) pottery appears to have inspired a local production of bichrome-painted ceramics in the southern Levant, namely at a considerable distance from sites where significant amounts of Halaf/Ubaid pottery have been found.

The uneven distribution and reworking of traits attest in the first place to the significance of the role played by local socio-economic conditions and cultural practices in determining their dissemination. Receptivity, however, can also be influenced by other elements. Relationships existing between communities and/or individuals are of course of great importance. Indeed, the very relational character of socio-material networks might help to explain a distribution of traits that eludes spatial proximity. As shown by the small-world theory, transmission over considerable distances does not necessarily entail a higher number of steps: small numbers of individuals with wider contacts may also be important functioning as links in a wider network. Individual potters, itiner-

17. Multiple ties can simultaneously bind individuals, groups of people and communities. Interaction spheres can intersect or merge, and vary to a more or less considerable degree over time, contributing to shape practices and therefore identities at both individual and collective level, even if they are not to be confused, given their very multi-scalar and fluctuating character, with 'cultural' or 'ethnic' markers of some sort (Asouti 2006).

ant or simply travelling over medium-to-long distances more or less regularly, could have spread pottery technology and styles even to an area like the southern Levant which is traditionally considered outside both the Halaf and Ubaid horizons. Similarly, in the southern Levant, the manufacture of Halaf/Ubaid-related pottery could have been promoted by aggrandizing individuals willing to exploit a prestige technology to acquire power (Hayden 1998), or by a part of a community, following preferential relationships or allegiances with other, distant communities. The nature of relationships, however, could also place constraints on the dispersal of innovation. Tsaf Ware, whose manufacture entailed a specialized know-how, was apparently produced in a very few centres, perhaps only one at its inception. This could also indicate that the diffusion of bichrome-painted pottery in the southern Levant was related to a restricted knowledge transmission network, as in the case of other specialized technologies like the use of 'rotary kinetic energy' and the lost-wax technique (Roux 2010).

Clearly, the mechanisms of diffusion of Halaf- and Ubaid-related pottery throughout the Levant are far from understood. Anyway, bichrome-painted ceramics contained in Late Neolithic and Early Chalcolithic Levantine assemblages are evidently distinguished for both their particularity and relatedness to the Halaf/Ubaid tradition. Their occurrence should therefore be primarily conceived as a peculiar expression of the vast Halaf and Ubaid supra-regional socio-material networks: their examination helps us assess the impact of the Halaf and Ubaid phenomena in an area like the Levant, in order to better understand how the "peripheries" of both *oikoumenai* were characterized.

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