

A SHORT NOTE ON PREHISTORIC POTTERY FROM ASHUR (QAL'AT SHERQAT)

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La fundación de Ashur, núcleo del Imperio Asirio tardío, se ha adscrito al 3rd milenio aC. Recientemente, Reinhard Dittmann recuperó dos recipientes in situ considerados indicadores de actividad neolítica en el yacimiento. Esta adscripción cronológica se puede confirmar por algunas de las nuevas observaciones procedentes de los fragmentos cerámicos de las excavaciones del siglo XX.

Centro de Irak, Hassuna, Samarra, Halaf, Ubaid.

The foundation of Ashur, the core of the later Assyrian empire, is generally ascribed to the 3rd millennium BC. Reinhard Dittmann recently quoted two vessels of an in situ context as an indicator for some Neolithic settlement activities. This attempt can be confirmed now by some new observations on shreds from excavations from the 20th century.

Central Iraq, Hassuna, Samarra, Halaf, Ubaid.

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INTRODUCTION

The date of the earliest settlement at Ashur, the later core of the Assyrian empire, is still a matter of debate. Walter Andrae (1938, 98), who excavated Ashur at the beginning of the 20th century, already discussed a prehistoric presence on the basis of some simple pits and fire places which were observed on the natural rock below the massive structures of the 3rd millennium BC and beyond. Nevertheless, he also stressed that such interpretation is weak since lithics or prehistoric sherds were never found. Jürgen Bär (1999) lastly discussed some objects which may belong to the

Djemdet Nasr period (late 4th/early 3rd millennium BC), but he had to reject them. Meanwhile the discussion on Ashur's earliest date concentrated generally on the 3rd millennium BC – so far accepted by the scientific community. However, recently, Reinhard Dittmann (2010, 51 n. 17) also assumed a Neolithic age (proto-Hassuna/Hassuna-Samarra) for three vessels from Ashur, which were published on a photograph of an *in situ* feature¹ below the central court of the later Ashur temple (Haller/Andrae 1955, pl. 25a).² The character of the vessels is quite coarse, which is not common for the later pottery finds of Ashur. Besides this, the profiles resemble typical jars from Tell es-Sotto (Bader 1993,

1. Referring to Dittmann a pottery kiln with a perforated floor – like the earliest known two-stage kilns from Yarim Tepe I,7 (Merpert/Munchaev 1993, 85 Fig. 6:2:3) – which probably belongs to the same level.

2. Helen Gries (2017) will also publish a sketch of the vessel's profile, which was made by the excavators within the Ashur-documentary (I thank her for this advice). But note that such sketches were generally not very precise.

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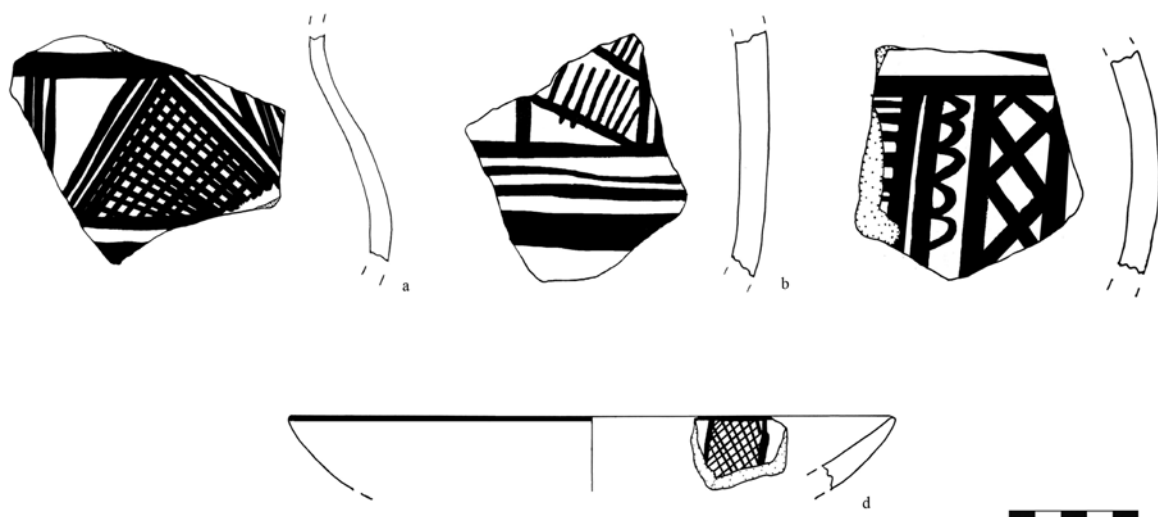


Figure 1. Ashur: sherds dedicated to the Late Northern Ubaid/LC1-2 period.

48 fig. 3.5), Yarim Tepe I (Merpert/Munchaev 1993, 106 fig. 6.18 type I) or Sabi Abyad lev. 8/Pre-Halaf IIC (Nieuwenhuyse 2007, 340-341 Pl. 19.2).³

DISCUSSION

The work on the prehistoric pottery of Tell Nader (Beuger/Kopaniyas *this volume*) initiated a re-evaluation of the pottery from Ashur, since some vessel types and decoration patterns never really fit within the 3rd millennium assemblages. At first this review was focussed on the pottery corpus of the deep trench at Ashur, which was excavated in the late 1980's by Reinhard Dittmann (Dittmann *et al.* 1988; Dittmann 1990; Beuger 2007) and on the pottery corpus of the so called Archaic Ishtar temples, which were excavated by Walter Andrae in the early 20th century (Andrae 1922; Bär 2003).⁴ Both complexes were studied years ago within a dissertation project, but the general stage of investigations on Ashur set clear limits on the perception of this question at that time. At a conference in Athens (Beuger 2016) a preliminary attempt was made to demonstrate a Chalcolithic

presence (Ubaid, LC1-2 and probably LC3-4) in Ashur. Later, while checking some sherds which were identified as Scarlet Ware by Nagel (1964)⁵ at the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin, additionally, a handful of Neolithic sherds from varying contexts in Ashur came into view. With the permission of the Vorderasiatisches Museum⁶, some examples which support this early date can be published now. Indeed, the number is quite small, but the sherds definitively do exist, so they shall allow a new interpretation on Ashur's early steps:

The Chalcolithic presence at Ashur may be confirmed by some further examples (Fig. 1; Late Northern Ubaid/LC 1-2 period⁷). Especially the relatively coarse fabric with some organic temper is used as an indicator of a Chalcolithic instead of Halaf age. The decoration pattern and fine fabric of the sherds in Fig. 2 suggests a Late Halaf date.⁸ The Halafian zoomorphic vessel fragment (Fig. 2a) finds a good reference at Tell Arpachiyah: a hollow vessel interpreted as a hedgehog with red painted bristles on buff clay (Mallowan/Rose 1935, 88 Pl. 5 A99, "found in TT 6 adjoining the burnt house"; ht. 12 cm, l. 19 cm, cup-shaped mouth on

3. Another reference is probably Bader 1993, 12-13 Fig. 2.6: a "grain storage bin" of unbacked clay at Tell Maghzaliyah.

4. The deepest level H of this temple complex presents the only architecture in Ashur founded on natural rock (Miglus 1996, 53; Bär 2003, 39-41; Beuger 2013, 3-4), however this is not a criterion for a prehistoric age: The structures of level H were cut down before they were copied and reused in parts by the following structures which clearly date to the late 3rd millennium BC. Finally a handful of finds from the H contexts also point to the 3rd millennium BC.

5. Actually the examples mentioned by Nagel 1964, 14 (Beuger 2016, 22 n. 14) are elaborately painted pieces of Djemdet Nasr/Scarlet Ware.

6. I thank Prof. Dr. Markus Hilgert and Dr. Lutz Martin for their kind support.

7. Fig. 1b: Tobler 1950, Pl. CXXVIII, 184 (Gawra XIII), Pl. CXXXIII, 243-245 (Gawra XII), Pl. CXXXVII, 294-295 (Gawra XII); Fig. 1c: Tobler 1950, Pl. LXXVIII, a = CXXXIX, 309 (Gawra X); Fig. 1d: Tobler 1950 CXXXV, 263 (Gawra below XII).

8. Fig. 2b: Becker 2012, 169; Mallowan/Cruikshank Rose 1935, 139 Fig. 64,6,8 (TT7/TT10 or earlier); Fig. 2c: decor: Mallowan/Cruikshank Rose 1935, Fig. 38,1 (Ubaid); Fig. 2d: decor: Tobler 1950, Pl. LXVII (Halaf: level E, Area A), Pl. CXXXVI, 278 (Strat. XII), vertical S-shaped bowl ref. Nieuwenhuyse 2007, Pl. 102-103 Sabi Abyad lev. (8)7-5/4; Fig. 2e: Mallowan/Cruikshank Rose 1935, 153 Fig. 70,2 (early Halaf before TT10, conical bowl); decor: Mallowan/Cruikshank Rose 1935, 134 Fig. 63,3 (TT6-TT7, cream bowl).

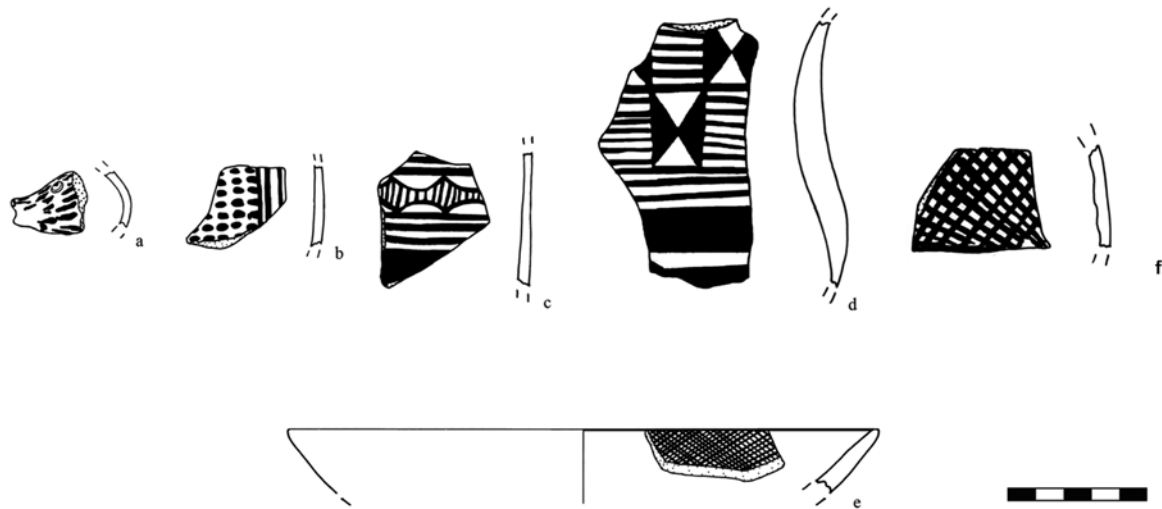


Figure 2. Ashur: sherds dedicated to the Halaf period (2.a to 2.e). 2.f- sherd dedicated to the Hassuna/Samarra period (?).

top of the hedgehog's back); also without a hole in the snout. However, the excavator documented the piece from Ashur as a wild boar (with question mark). The sherd (Fig. 2.f) with red painted decoration on a light slip (?) resembles the typical Samarra style (Gut 1995, 85 Taf. 25,435). However, the motive of a triangle built of crossed lines seems to be more relevant for the Hassuna painted ware (Gut 1995, Taf. 14, 18-19). The fabric does not contradict a Neolithic age, although the inside shows quite regular deep grooves, which might belong to the potters' work on a wheel, which makes this example a weak candidate for this early age (Fig.3).

CONCLUSION

In sum, we shall assume some kind of prehistoric activity within the later limits of Ashur. Similar to the later 3rd millennium settlement, a concentration on the northern fringe should be supposed. Here, the topography functioned as a natural fortress on a steep rock overlooking the Tigris plains, especially to the north (Andrae 1938, 98). Nevertheless, the prehistoric sherds are scattered across the entire area of the city ruins.

In regard to the workshop topic of "using pots is useful for crossing chronology and archaeological stratigraphic sequences", it is clear that using pots – or in this case sherds – is the only possibility. They add an important aspect to the settlement history of Mesopotamia and Ashur in particular, or help to write a short settlement history about Tell Nader (Beuger/Kopaniak *this volume*), since so far nothing else but the pottery proves the Neolithic age of these sites.

Additionally, the geographical position of Ashur for all periods is a crucial marker in all maps. It ties in the southern and the northwestern spheres through the millennia. Unfortunately, we cannot provide more accurate information at the moment about how these ties are to be defined by the material culture of the prehistoric periods.

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Fig.	Assur No. Museum No. (site square)	Description
1a	Ass. 6429 VA Ass 3466 (eD6I)	body sherd (dm 20,0 cm); (no fresh break:) fine clay, a lot of medium sized organic temper, some fine mineral inclusions, medium hard burnt, o./i./c. greenish-buff, wheel-made (?), o./i. wet finished, slightly smoothed, o. painting of dark brown clay-colour (partly eroded)
1b	Ass. 13751 VA Ass 3464 (-)	body sherd (dm c. 32,0 cm ?); (no fresh break:) fine clay, a lot of organic inclusions, medium hard burnt, o. greenish-grey/grey-buff, i. light greenish-buff, c. greyish-buff, roughly hand-made, o. some burnish, irregular but smooth, i. irregular rough burnish, o. painting of black clay-colour
1c	Ass. 4628 VA Ass 3466 (hE5I)	body sherd (dm c. 44,0 cm), orientation unclear; fine clay, frequent fine and medium size organic temper and medium size black minerals, some small stones and fine lime, medium hard burnt, o. light greenish-buff, i./c. greyish-buff, hand-made (irregular thickness), o./i. smoothed (some vertical irregular burnishing), o. painting of dark brown clay-colour (partly transparent)
1d	Ass. 21371 VA Ass 3466 (fE6II)	rim sherd (dm 24,0 cm); very fine clay, frequent medium size organic temper, some fine lime, medium hard burnt, o./i. light greenish-buff, c. light rose-orange-buff, hand-made, o./i. smoothed, i./o. painting of dark brown clay-colour
2a	Ass. 4926c VA Ass 3466 (h3?)	zoomorphic vessel fragment (head of hedgehog?); very fine clay, some fine mica and black mineral inclusions, hard burnt, o./i. greyish-buff, c. light rose-orange, hand-made (?), o./i. smoothed, o. painting of dark brown clay-colour, eye appliqué, pupil painted, mouth and nostril impressed
2b	Ass. 4992 VA Ass 3466 (hE5I)	body sherd (dm 18 cm ?); very fine clay, some fine mica and black mineral inclusions, very hard burnt, o./i. rose-buff, c. light rose-orange, hand-made, o. polished, i. smoothed, o. painting of dark brown clay-colour
2c	Ass. 5022a VA Ass 3466 (hE4V)	body sherd (dm 9,0 cm); (no fresh break:) very fine clay, no inclusions, very hard burnt, o./i./c. light buff, hand-made, o. smoothed (not polished), i. wet finished, o. painting of dark brown clay-colour
2d	Ass. 16027a VA Ass 3464 (hC11II)	body sherd (dm 11,0 cm); (no fresh break:) fine clay, a lot of mineral inclusions, some fine lime, medium hard burnt, o. greenish-buff, i. buff, c. rose-buff, hand-made, o. some burnish, smooth, i. wet finish, o. painting of brownish-black clay-colour
2e	Ass. 5829b VA Ass 3466 (eC6I)	rim sherd (dm 22,0 cm); fine clay, (no fresh break:) some fine mica, very hard burnt, o./i. light buff, c. rose-light orange, hand-made, o./i. slightly smoothed/polished, i. and rim painting of dark brown clay-colour
2f	Ass. 4550 VA Ass 3466 (fD4III)	body sherd (dm c. 26,0 cm) (no fresh break:); fine clay, frequent fine mineral inclusions and fine lime, some fine organic inclusions, hard burnt, o. light buff, i./c. rose-buff, wheel-made (?), o. slip (?), o./i. smoothed (some irregular burnishing), o. painting of reddish brown clay-colour

Figure 3. Catalogue.

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