

PLAIN POTTERY TRADITIONS OF
THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN
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PLAIN POTTERY TRADITIONS OF THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN AND NEAR EAST

Production, Use, and Social Significance



Edited by
Claudia Glatz



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9 Ceramic Consumption and Social Context at Middle and Neo-Assyrian Dur-Katlimmu

Janoscha Kreppner

The second half of the 2nd millennium BC in northern Mesopotamia is marked by clashes among the territorial states of Mitanni, Hatti, Egypt, Assyria and Babylonia. The Mitanni empire, with its centre situated in the Khabur Triangle in north-eastern Syria, perished in the later 14th century BC partly because of Hittite pressure and partly because of internal causes. As a result, Assyria, with its core territory along the Tigris, was able first to free itself from its former sovereign's grip and take over parts of Mitanni territory. The Hittite empire collapsed around the turn of the 13th to the 12th century BC and along with it ceased Hittite hold over northern Syria. During the same period, Babylonia and Egypt suffered from phases of inner frailty, which lead to dynastic changes in both polities. By contrast, Assyria experienced a relative measure of continuity, including a remarkable dynastic longevity that stretches from the 2nd millennium BC until the end of the 7th century BC.

Assyria's imperial history can be divided into four phases (Postgate 1992: 247–51):¹ first, the consolidation of its core-region along the Tigris and its subsequent expansion to the Euphrates in the west between 1400 and 1200 BC; second, a lengthy recession from 1200 to 900 BC;² third, the progressive re-establishment of the earlier Euphrates border from about 900 to 745 BC; and fourth, the final phase of expansion into Egypt and Iran between 745 to 605 BC.

Sites across the northern Mesopotamian plains and neighbouring regions have yielded large quantities of Late Bronze Age ([LBA] Tenu 2009) and

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Iron Age ([IA] Anastasio 2010; Hausleiter 2010) plain ware ceramics that have been associated with Assyrian state control. In this chapter, I explore the question of whether and how the sociopolitical context of pottery consumption influenced technological and formal ceramic characteristics, in particular degrees of vessel standardisation. Two archaeological contexts at Tell Sheikh Hamad, the Assyrian city of Dur-Katlimmu, allow us to address this question. Both contexts furnished large quantities of cuneiform tablets that inform us about the sociopolitical context of the pottery assemblages. The first context dates to the first phase of Assyrian expansion during the 13th century BC and is located in the LBA governor's palace on the citadel of Dur-Katlimmu. A total of eleven storage rooms, which formed part of the LBA governor's palace, have been excavated. Room A in particular provides us with the opportunity to explore the question of how functional context may have affected ceramic characteristics. The second context dates to the latest phase of the Assyrian empire and its aftermath in the late 6th and early 5th centuries BC. It comprises the so-called Red House, an IA elite residence located in the centre of the Lower Town II. The Red House consists of 90 rooms with a variety of functions, and its pottery provides us with the opportunity to observe the continuity of ceramic production and consumption after the empire's fall.

Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu: An Assyrian Provincial Capital

Signs of dissolution and decay in the Mitanni state became increasingly evident during the mid-14th century BC. Assyrian rulers took advantage of this situation and freed themselves of Mitanni control. From this time onwards, Assyria came to be a territorial state with its centre shaped by the three cities of Assur, Arbela and Nineveh, which were all located along the Tigris in today's northern Iraq (Radner 2011). Assyrian rulers used the title 'king' and defined their territory as *mat Assur* ([land of Assur] Postgate 2011: 89–93).

In the Upper Khabur region, the former territory of the Hurrian state of Hanigalbat was incorporated as a tax-paying vassal into the Assyrian realm at the time of king Adad-Nerari I (1305–1274 BC). Under his successor, Shalmaneser I (1273–1244), the region became an Assyrian province with its headquarters at Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996: 19–25) on the eastern bank of the Khabur in north-eastern Syria (fig. 9.1). Dur-Katlimmu housed a governor and *sukkal mah* (great-vizier), who oversaw the western part of the Assyrian state's political administration, development and security (Kühne 2013a: 474–76) and was connected with the capital at Assur via an east-west route across the steppe (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003: 348).

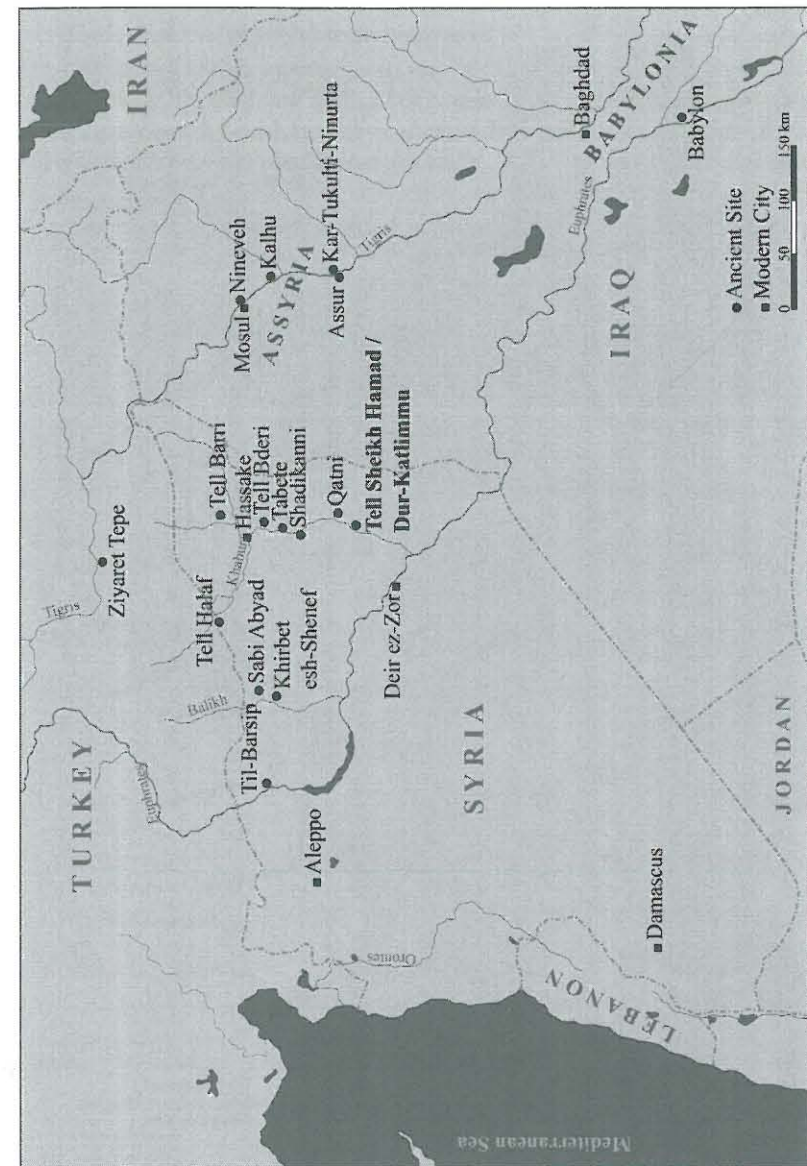


Figure 9.1 Location of Tell Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu

Building P: A Late Bronze Age Governor's Palace

Building P on the western slope of the citadel formed part of a Middle Assyrian governor's palace (fig. 9.2). The excavated portion of the structure, a total of about 200 m², consists of a series of basement storage rooms that underwent several rebuilding phases (Pfälzner 1995). The smallest of these rooms, Room A, contained an archive of cuneiform tablets found densely packed in a black ashy layer (figs. 9.3, 9.4). The tablets had been stored alongside large

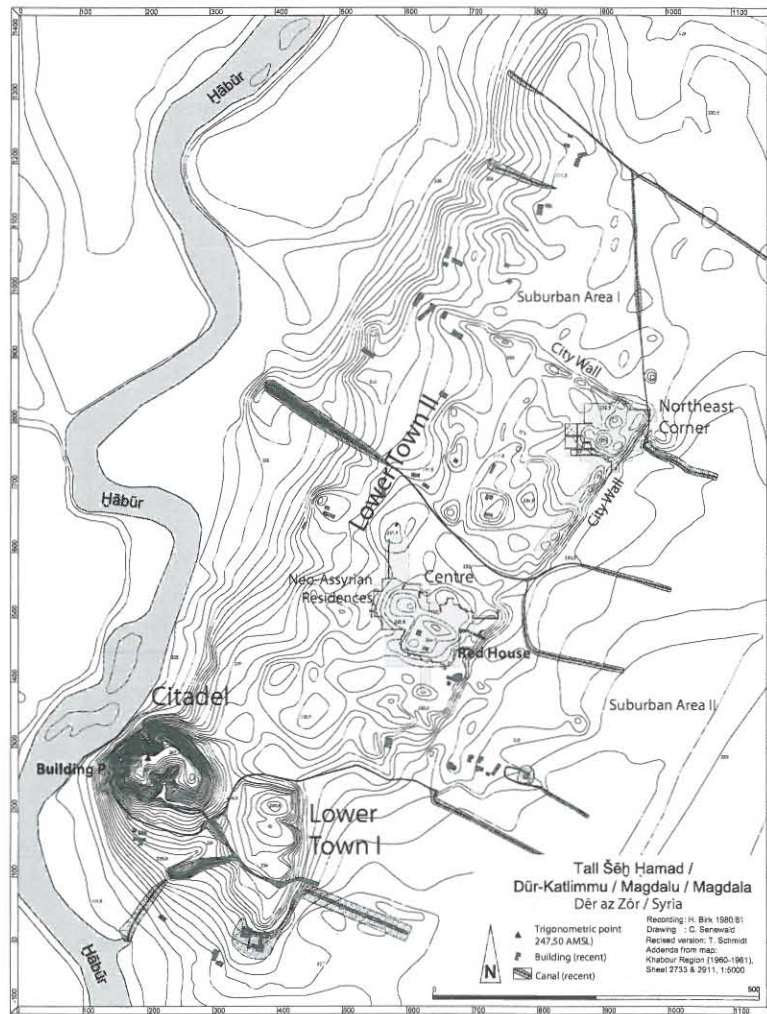


Figure 9.2 Topographic map of Tell Sheikh Hamad and excavation sectors

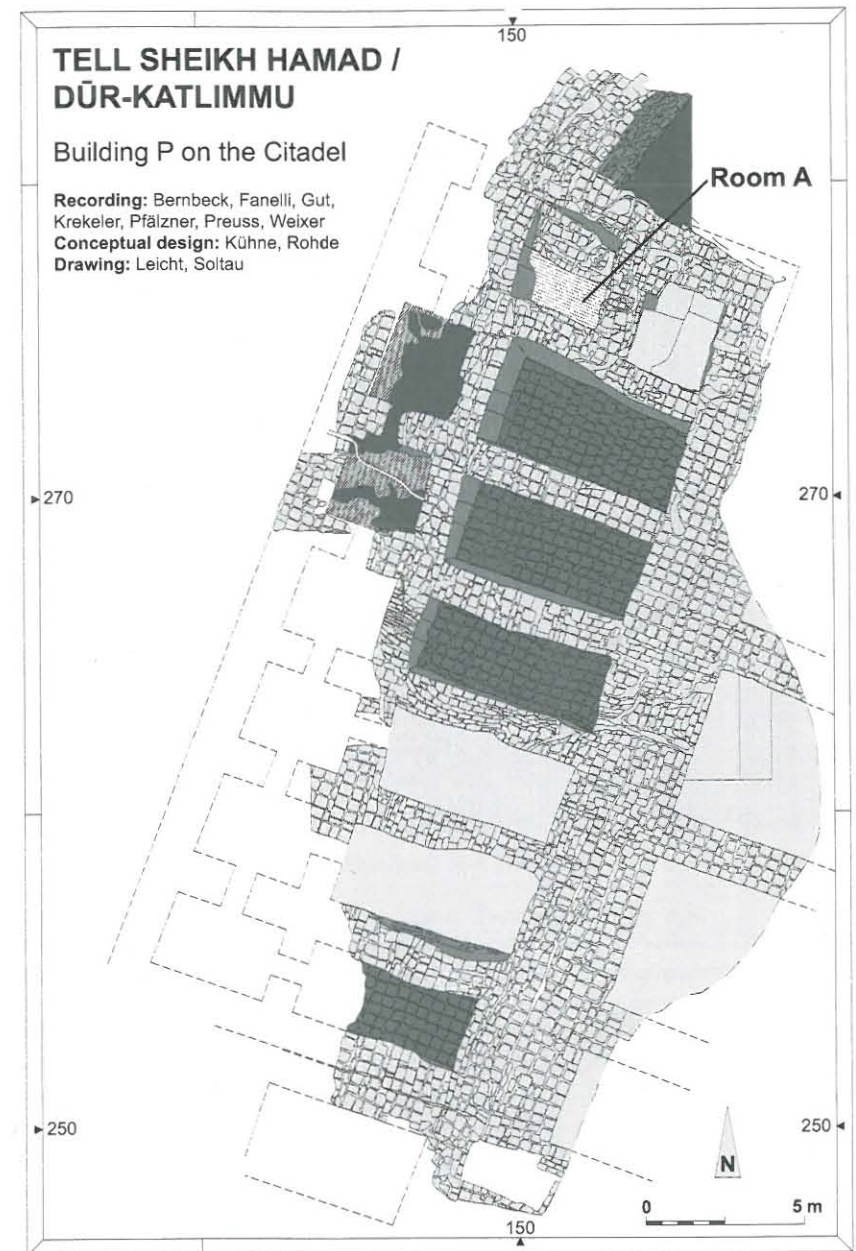


Figure 9.3 Plan of the Building P on the citadel



Figure 9.4 Aerial view of Building P on the citadel

quantities of pottery in an upper storey (the ground floor of the building), which collapsed into Room A during a fire. The basement it collapsed into was used as a granary as attested by over a half-ton of charred grain, which was excavated in the lower fill. Following its destruction by fire, Room A was not re-used unlike its neighbouring Rooms C, J, G and D, which continued to be used for storage until they were destroyed at a later stage. Thus, the pottery excavated in Room A is older than the material from adjacent rooms.

The tablet archive of Room A consists of several hundred texts and text fragments of letters, contracts, receipts and lists detailing the political and administrative activities of Assur-iddin, a *sukkal mah* of the Middle Assyrian royal family (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996; Röllig 2008). Assur-iddin was in charge of the so-called 'Western Empire' or Hanigalbat in the second half of the 13th century BC and was a contemporary of Shalmaneser I (1273–1244 BC) and Tukulti-Ninurta I ([1243–1207 BC] Kühne 2008: 545–46).

Accordingly, the pottery from Room A has been assigned a Middle Assyrian I date (= Middle Jazirah IIA, *c.* 1270–1200 BC), while the surrounding rooms date to the Middle Assyrian II ([= Middle Jazirah IIB, *c.* 1200–1120 BC] Pfälzner 2007: 236–37). The presence of the tablet archive and their contents leaves little doubt about the official nature of this part of the structure. Associated pottery assemblages too are, thus, likely to have served official or state-related functions.

Pottery of Governance?

Room A yielded a total of 1986 ceramic fragments (Pfälzner 1995: 120). Of these, 573 pieces belong to typical carinated open shapes, the Standard Carinated Cup, which has a rim diameter of around 9 cm and the Standard Carinated Bowl, with an average diameter of 20 cm (Pfälzner 1995: 243–44). A total of 20 whole bowl and cup profiles were recovered from Room A. Fifteen of these are cups and 5 bowls. In the case of the cups, calculated vessel capacities average around 0.15 litres, with one outlier at 0.58 litres. The 5 bowls average around 1.66 litres (fig. 9.5; Chambon and Kreppner 2010: 11–32). The proportion of the capacities of the 2 groups is approximately 1:10 and significant because the bowls appear to be standardised according to the decimal system. This would suggest that open vessels of two sizes were stored in Room A, which correspond with Pfälzner's Standard Carinated Cups and Standard Carinated Bowls.

These two types are not only found at Tell Sheikh Hamad, but they are ubiquitous at Middle Assyrian provincial centres in the Syrian Jazirah, as well as the Assyrian heartland at sites such as Assur and Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta where they are associated in particular with official/administrative contexts. In the

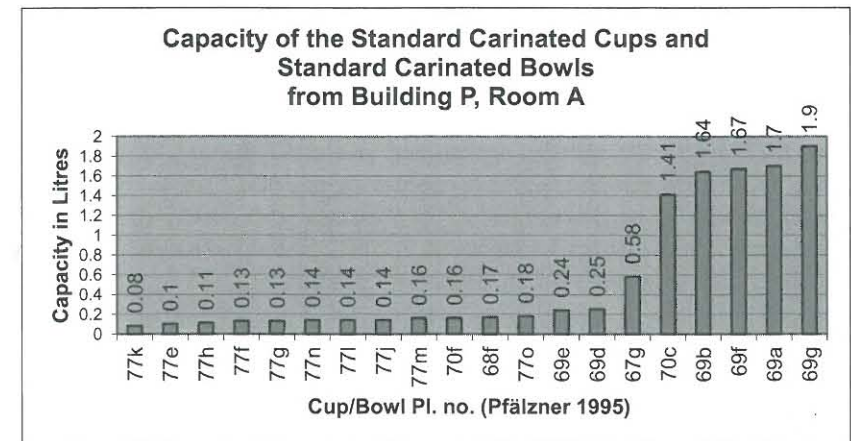


Figure 9.5 Capacities of individual open vessels from Building P, Room A

light of these ceramic parallels, Pfälzner (2007: 250) proposed that Assyrian imperial administration brought with it a specific ceramic tradition and its mode of production to the provinces. He named this type of pottery *Middle Assyrian Administrative Pottery* (Pfälzner 2007: 250) and distinguished it from *Middle Assyrian Domestic Pottery*, which was excavated outside the palace at Tell Sheikh Hamad and at a small site called Khirbet esh-Shenef.

A characteristic feature of Middle Assyrian Administrative Pottery is its manufacture in the so-called *Middle Assyrian Standard Ware* which displays highly standardised fabric and technological features. It is by far the most frequent Middle Assyrian ware. It has a medium-coarse to coarse chaff temper, which fires to reddish or greenish colours. Vessels are wet-smoothed without a slip and show signs of rather careless wheel production, such as formal irregularity and asymmetry, and with small clay lumps left on surfaces. This indicates that speed of production was at the heart of this potting tradition. The apparent carelessness with which these vessels were produced, and which resulted in high frequencies of irregular and asymmetrical vessels is, according to Pfälzner (2007: 251), a consequence of mass production in state organised manufactories.

Three vessel types in particular were produced in large quantities, mainly using Standard Ware: Standard Carinated Cups (figs. 9.6.1–14; figs. 9.7.3–9), Standard Carinated Bowls (figs. 9.6.16–20; figs. 9.7.10–11) and Standard Bottles (figs. 9.7.1, 2). Because of a group of texts found in Room A that state rations of cereals are measured out to individuals, Pfälzner (1995: 243) concluded that the standardised bowls and cups found alongside these texts functioned as ration vessels to be used in official administrative contexts. In the specific context of Room A at Middle Assyrian Dur-Katlimmu, however, the concentration of a small number of standardised vessel types appears to indicate a single specific, state-related or administrative function for these cups and bowls.

Pfälzner's interpretation of ceramic mass production in state-organised manufactories, as well as the function of the standardised bowls and cups as ration vessels, contrasts with the findings at the Middle Assyrian site of Tell Sabi Abyad, a small 'fortified agricultural production centre' (Wiggermann 2000: 172) on the Balikh river where approximately 400 Assyrian cuneiform tablets, as well as large quantities of plain pottery with mostly standardised shapes, have been excavated (Duistermaat 2008). The site consists of a *dunnu* (fortress) measuring 60 × 60 m, which was further protected by a moat and contained a series of dwellings and workshops. A thorough analysis of the pottery evidence from Levels 3–6 (13th and 12th centuries BC) showed that carinated bowls (Types 111 and 112) are present in a whole range of different functional contexts, suggestive of a multipurpose vessel. Carinated bowls appear to have been used for the short-term, dry storage of food during preparation, as well as the serving and consumption of food and for

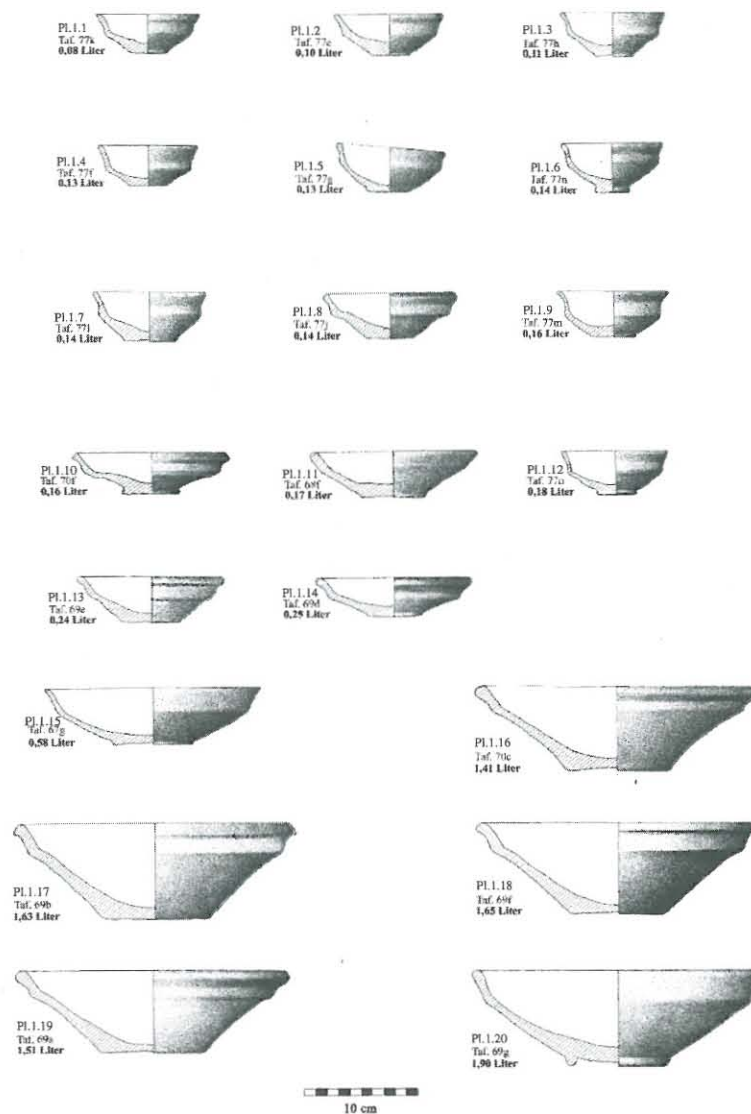


Figure 9.6 Cups and bowls from Building P, Room A; Taf.-Nr. cf. Pfälzner (1995)

other domestic or craft activities, including the processing of food and other materials (e.g. gypsum and bitumen). They also served as burial gifts, lamps and lids for jars (Duistermaat 2008: 567). Excavations of a great number of pottery workshops lead Duistermaat (2008, 420) to conclude that potters were part of the Assyrian administrative system, although they worked – contrary to

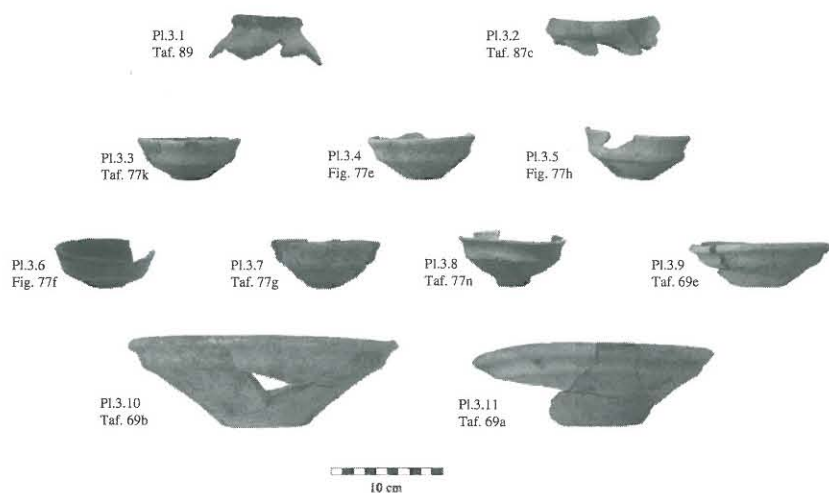


Figure 9.7 Photographs of bottle fragments, cups and bowls from Building P, Room A; Taf.-Nr. cf. Pfälzner (1995)

Pfälzner – in relatively independent and individually organised workshops, but were contracted and protected by the Middle-Assyrian *dunnu* administration.

Postgate (2010) renewed the discussion of Pfälzner's, as well as Duistermaat's interpretations regarding the association of this pottery with the Assyrian state in 'The Debris of Government'. In his opinion, this type of 'pottery is an integral component of the package of Assyrian occupation, a package which also included tablets, another fairly durable component of material record' (Postgate 2010: 27). He explains the standardisation as follows (Postgate 2010: 28):

The Assyrian officials kept meticulous accounts of amounts of grain or other commodities issued by their officials for a variety of purposes, borrowing the practices of the commercial world of the Assyrian merchant houses. They were expected to keep accurate records of the quantities entrusted to them, and hence needed containers of known capacity. It would be understandable if the state made an effort to simplify these procedures by standardising the containers used.

Taking account of the Sabi Abyad evidence, Postgate (2010: 32) proposes that the development of standardised ceramic assemblages was not an intentional imposition of a centralised state administration but rather as a response by the potters to the growing demand for certain functional types with specific volumetric requirements.

Evidence from Tell Sheikh Hamad and Sabi Abyad indicate that simultaneously with the expansion of the Assyrian state to the west in the

13th century BC, certain types of ceramics were introduced and that a direct relationship existed between these vessels and the Assyrian administration. Aside from homogeneity in ware and form, the plain open vessels also cluster in distinct size categories. However, due to the above described irregularities (Pfälzner 2007: 251, Duistermaat 2008: 409), vessel volumes are not standardised enough to be considered as ration containers, if equality and fairness in the distribution of goods were important considerations. It is possible, of course, that there were no clear regulations for how exact a measure should be. Markings on vessel walls, which could have guaranteed exact measures of capacity despite morphological irregularities, have not been found so far. It is possible that during the process of measuring, specific gauges were used, but such vessels are not documented as yet. Examples for such vessels are known from Egypt, for instance, where they are made from metal, leather, wood or cloth, and marks or inscriptions are used to gage standardised measures of volume (Pommerening 2005). Returning to the Middle Assyrian context, the clustering of plain ware, open vessels in general size classes, however, does seem to indicate that they were intended to hold standard volumes as defined by the Assyrian administration. Rather than meeting overly exacting standards, however, these vessels may have needed to hold *at least* the volume defined by standard measures. To do so, they did not necessarily need to be calibrated and marked in the process. Furthermore, these plain ware open vessels were produced in large quantities and, as attested at Sabi Abyad, used in a variety of activities including those where vessel capacity appears to have been of no concern.

The Red House

Assyria's territorial expansion climaxed in the 7th century BC under the reigns of Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) and Assurbanipal (668–631 BC), when Assyria temporarily dominated Babylonia, Egypt and Elam (Phase 4 above). During this phase, Assyria may be described as a 'World Empire' (Nissen 2012: 122) – the most sophisticated and complex political system in the history of the ancient Near East up to this point. However, within only seven years of its maximum expansion, the political entity of Assyria had vanished from the historical map. A number of causes, internal and external, contributed to this sudden collapse from 'territorial overstretch' (Lamprichs 1995) to Babylonian and Median military success, which led to the destruction of Assyria's main centres at Assur, Dur-Sarrukin, Kalhu, Nineveh and Harran in the years 614, 612 and 608 BC. After this, Assyria ceased to exist as an autonomous political unit.

Dur-Katlimmu reached its maximum spatial extent of roughly 110 ha in the period from the 9th to the 6th century BC and through the addition of about 60 ha of lower town (Lower Town II) and new suburbs. The significance of

Dur-Katlimmu can be seen in its geostrategic position: the town is situated west of the Assyrian capitals and lies – after the expansion to the west – at the centre of this large, newly acquired territory. Dur-Katlimmu was an important garrison town with chariot troops and intelligence services, it is situated at the intersection of two royal roads, one running along the Khabur valley, the other leading eastwards to Assur. This is documented by about 220 text fragments, 200 of them found in the so-called Red House (Radner 2002, 2008, 2010).

During the reign of Assurbanipal (668–631/27? BC), Shulmu-Sharri, the master of the archive containing most of the attested texts from the site, gained a prominent economic and social position, which would seem to make him the most likely patron for the construction of the Red House. The main period of use of the Red House can be dated to the third quarter of the 7th century BC. Each of the youngest four clay tablets, deposited at the end of the main use period in Room XX, name as a date a year under the reign of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II (Kühne 1993). In consequence, they date the building's destruction to a period after the year 600 BC (*terminus post quem*) and into the first half of the 6th century BC when northern Mesopotamia was under Babylonian rule (612–539 BC). The Red House, whose name derives from its red-coloured walls, is located in the centre of the Lower Town II (fig. 9.2). The occupation of the Red House spans this dramatic period of political transformation and allows insights into life in northern Mesopotamia before and after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire. The complete ground plan of the Red House has been unearthed (fig. 9.8). The building covered an area of 5200 m² and was composed of 5 courtyards and 90 rooms (Kreppner and Schmid 2013). Several functional units could be distinguished, which include 7 reception suites, 5 bathrooms, 5 staircases and several storage rooms. Since all rooms have been excavated, the pottery from all functional units could be studied. The main phase in which the Red House was in use was ended abruptly by a fire and widespread destruction. As a result, large quantities of pottery were found on floors covered by destruction debris.

Next to the Red House was found a pottery kiln (Kreppner 2008a: 161, fig. 2), which could be accessed from the Red House through a side entrance. The pottery from this kiln and the Red House are of the standard Assyrian style found in earlier phases at Tell Sheikh Hamad and elsewhere in the region. In concert with the absence of Neo-Babylonian style pottery from production and habitation contexts, this demonstrates that the dramatic political transformations brought about by the fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire had no immediate impact on local ceramic production and tastes. Similar signs of cultural continuity have been observed across northern Mesopotamia, and it is, thus, not possible to distinguish between pre- and postcollapse contexts on the basis of ceramic evidence alone (Kreppner 2008a: 155).³



Figure 9.8 Aerial view of the Red House

The Pottery from the Red House

Large quantities of pottery (51,767 pieces) have been excavated from the Red House. Degrees of fragmentation vary across this large structure, and finds are divided into three groups: rim fragments, rims with identifiable side profiles, and complete vessel-profiles. Red House wares, as defined by raw material and added temper, include a medium-to-coarse straw-tempered ware (A1) and Ware A2, which uses the same clay but without straw temper, and the fine-grained Ware B1 also without straw temper. Ware B1 is usually referred to as 'Palace Ware'. Alongside it existed another fine ware with straw temper (B2). Ware C and D are coarse cooking pot fabrics (Daszkiewicz *et al.* 2006; for more detail see Kreppner 2006: 51–61, 2008b).

Ware 1 clearly dominates the Red House assemblage, with 90.81% of all pottery produced as this ware. Ware A2 accounts for 5.81% of the material. Fine wares (B1: 1.03%; B2: 0.16%) and cooking wares (C: 1.43%; D: 0.30%;

others: 0.46%) each account for just over 1% of the assemblage. The majority of pottery from the Red House are plain wares. Slipped and painted decoration is very rare in this elite context, and red slips, ‘glazes’ and painted examples make up less than 1% of the assemblage. Only pottery with incised wavy lines, or Sheikh-Hamad Ware, was somewhat more popular (c. 2%) and represents a local tradition (Kreppner 2006: 62–67).

Another Look at Plain Bowls at Sheikh Hamad

Analysing the complete Red House Plain Ware bowls (Ware A1) with regards to their capacities, we see a rather different pattern emerge to that of the bowls found in the storage rooms of the LBA governor’s palace. Figure 9.9 and fig. 9.10.1–21 illustrate greater formal diversity and more variation with regards to vessel capacity within formal types with no identifiable size categories emerging. There are also no overly dominant ceramic types, such as the Standard Carinated Cups and Bowls of the Middle Assyrian period. This variation would seem to be the result of the multifunctional character of the Red House: the various functional units of this elite household would have resulted in the use of a wide variety of vessel types.

It is unknown in which year the destruction of the Red House occurred and to what or whom we may attribute its demise. No large-scale military campaigns are recorded along the Khabur in the chronicles (Röllig 1993). It could well be that local events caused the destruction of the Red House. No human victims were found inside the destroyed building, and it is, therefore, possible that some of its former inhabitants, having perhaps fled an attack, subsequently reoccupied its ruins. The lack of effort expended on the rebuilding of the structure may be taken as a sign of increasingly deteriorating socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, the absence of clay tablets and seals from this reoccupation phase indicates that a rather substantial social transformation occurred at the site and that the Assyrian administrative system had ceased to function.

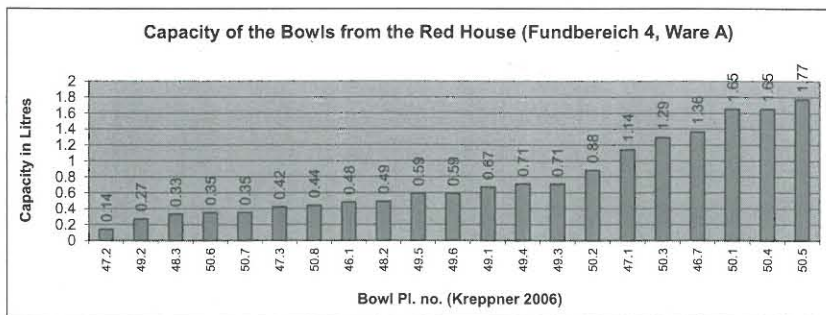


Figure 9.9 Capacities of individual Ware A1-open vessels from the Red House

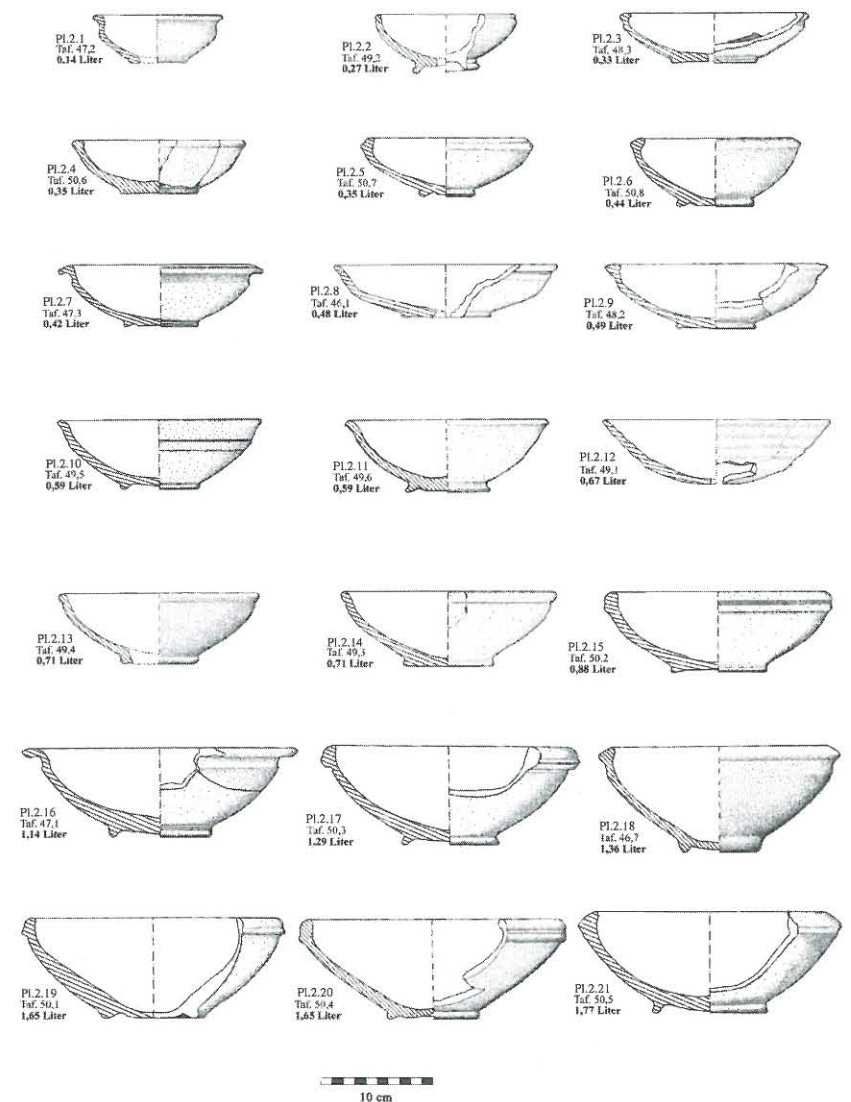


Figure 9.10 Ware A1-bowls from the Red House; Taf.-Nr. cf. Kreppner (2006)

The post-destruction ceramics were analysed from a sequence of three floors in the rooms QX and XZ (Kreppner 2006: 101–107). A chronological anchor is provided by three ostraka bearing Aramaic inscriptions. They were found on the uppermost of the three floors. Röllig (2003) dates them to the turn from the 6th to the 5th century BC. Thus, this pottery was in use 100 to 150 years after the fall

of the Neo-Assyrian empire, and after the Neo-Babylonian and the Achaemenid empire had come to power in Mesopotamia.

Socioeconomic decline is mirrored in the ceramic material in so far as fine wares (Ware B, the so-called 'Palace Ware'), as well as eye-catching decorations like red-slipped or glazed pottery – found in earlier levels of the Red House – become increasingly rare and disappear entirely in the last occupation phases. At the same time, however, the most popular pottery types found during the main occupation period of the Red House continue to be popular in the post-destruction period. We can, thus, propose an uninterrupted sequence of plain pottery production that spans the height and fall of the Neo-Assyrian empire from the mid-7th century BC to Neo-Babylonian and later Achaemenid empires in the early 5th century BC.

The Assyrian Empire and Ceramic Consumption at Dur-Katlimmu

The plain ware assemblages excavated on the slope of the citadel and in the centre of the Lower Town II originate from different time periods, different functional areas and different sociopolitical and economic spheres. On the basis of textual sources, Room A may be interpreted as a store of the Middle Assyrian palace of Assur-iddin: its formally limited and highly repetitive ceramic repertoire seemingly mirrors this function. In contrast, pottery from the late/post-imperial elite residence of the Red House includes a wide range of formal types and intratype variation in terms of, for instance, vessel capacity.

During the first phase of Assyrian westward expansion (1400–1200 BC), there appears to have been a direct relationship between Assyrian provincial administration and the pottery repertoires of sites under Assyrian rule. At Dur-Katlimmu, plain ware pottery was used in state-administrative contexts and was strongly standardised in ware and form. The existence of distinct size classes for carinated cups and bowls, which were produced in large numbers, can be interpreted as the result of a new form of Assyrian administrative organisation in the newly acquired provinces.

Sources for the time of Phase 2 of Assyrian history (1200–900 BC), which follows Tukulti-Ninurta I's murder in the year 1197 BC, are scarce and contradictory, but it appears that Assyria entered a deep crisis caused by domestic policy. Only after Assur-resh-ishi (1132–1115 BC), Tiglath-Pileser I (1114–1076 BC) and Assur-bel-kala (1073–1056 BC) came to power Assyria regained its strength, even if archaeological evidence and inscriptions for this period are similarly scarce. Assyrian districts (*pahutu*) founded in the 13th century BC in the Lower Khabur, such as Dur-Katlimmu, Qatni, Shadikanni and probably Tabete became autonomous local dynasties during the 11th and 10th centuries BC, but remained loyal to and dependents of Assur (Kühne 2013a: 480).

Despite these political changes, the pottery repertoire of the Lower Khabur, such as at Bderi (Pfälzner 1995, 2007), continued to be produced with only minor variations until 1050 BC. In regions, which appear to have gained independence from Assyria, however, localised ceramic traditions were established. Alongside the Upper Tigris 'grooved pottery' appeared during this period (d'Agostino 2011: 100–107). In the western triangle of the Khabur, local Early IA pottery may be connected with Aramean groups (Tell Halaf; *cf.* Sievertsen 2012; Novák 2013: 266–72). The regions around the modern town of Hassake and along the Lower Khabur, however, continued Assyrian pottery traditions as is documented by the excavations of Kahat (Tell Barri; d'Agostino 2011: 93–95), Tābetu (Tell Taban; Numoto *et al.* 2013), Shadikanni (Tell Ajaja) and Dur-Katlimmu (Tell Sheikh; Hamad; Kühne 2013a, 2013b).

Neo-Assyrian pottery starts to appear from the 10th century BC along the eastern Upper Khabur, as well as along the Lower Khabur. Our knowledge of the pottery in the transitional phase from the Middle- to the Neo-Assyrian tradition is limited so far, primarily due to a scarcity of Early IA assemblages from across northern Mesopotamia (Hausleiter 2010: 496–97; d'Agostino 2011). The Early IA is absent entirely, for instance, from the excavated sequence at Dur-Katlimmu (Kühne 2013b: 257).

During the third phase of Assyrian history (900–745 BC), regions situated between the Euphrates and the Tigris appear to have been under more or less stable Assyrian rule under Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) and Shalmaneser III (858–824 BC). Although this second expansion northwards is comparable to that of the 13th and 12th centuries BC, the political situation around Assyria, by contrast, had changed fundamentally. Assyria was no longer surrounded by states of comparable size but by small princedoms, which it had clearly surpassed in size and power from the middle of the 9th century BC. Local sovereigns had little choice but to accept Assyria's supremacy and were bound to it by oath and obliged to pay tribute. During this phase, Assyria may be described as a 'hegemonial empire lined by a periphery of client states' (Radner 2014: 103). The Euphrates region was no longer a border zone but increasingly became a staging post for Assyria's expansion to the west. This gave Dur-Katlimmu a much more central position in the empire. Extensive excavations and publications focussed on ceramics from this period are rare, and we know little about the pottery of the Khabur region, the Middle and Upper Euphrates and Upper Tigris (Hausleiter 2010: 248). At Dur-Katlimmu, pottery from the bottom of the town canal (Fügert *et al.* 2014), as well as from Tomb 03/28 (Kreppner and Hornig 2010), suggest that during this period Middle-Assyrian types were no longer in use. Instead, wares and forms are characteristic of the Neo-Assyrian repertoire. From these limited assemblages it would appear that there was no Neo-Assyrian equivalent to the standard Middle Assyrian carinated cups and bowls.

During the first half of the 8th century BC a process of decentralisation took place, which saw power and influence accumulate in the hands of provincial governors and other local potentates (e.g. at Nergal-eresh in Rasapa and Shamshi-ilu in Til-Barsip), and which increasingly threatened central power. After king Assur-nerari was driven from power, most likely by a coup d'état in Kalhu, numerous governors were replaced, and provinces were subdivided into smaller units to counteract this process.

At the onset of the fourth phase of Assyrian history (745–605 BC), King Tiglath-Pileser III (744–727 BC) doubled the territory directly controlled by Assyria. This was made possible by a combination of factors including successful administrative reforms, a heightened Assyrian presence in the provinces with stronger loyalty to the central power and military victories along the empire's borders (Radner 2014: 104). With former rivals now too small to offer any serious resistance, Assyria was able to incorporate them either as provinces or as tribute-bearing dependents. With the occupation of Babylon and the expansion to the Mediterranean coast, Assyria could now claim the status of a World Empire. Yet again, the geostrategic position of Dur-Katlimmu changed, making its location even more central to the empire.

At the end of the 7th century BC, Assyria's collapse followed shortly after its maximum territorial expansion under Esarhaddon (680–669 BC) and Assurbanipal (668–631 BC). Babylonian and Median troupes seized and burned Assur in 614 BC, Assyria's ideological core, followed by the devastation of Nineveh in 612 BC, its administrative and political centre.

Ceramics from the last phase of the Assyrian empire make up by far the largest portion of archaeologically documented Neo-Assyrian pottery. A remarkable continuity in ware and form can be charted from the 10th century until the empire's fall at the end of the 7th century BC. The assemblage of the Red House at Dur-Katlimmu furthermore demonstrates that this plain ware tradition continued to be produced and used after the political demise of Assyria and the destruction of the Red House. Its production lasted until the settlement area in the middle Lower Town II of Tell Sheikh Hamad was finally given up during the time of Achaemenid control over northern Mesopotamia at the end of the 6th or early 5th century BC.

Notes

1. Historical overviews: Cancik-Kirschbaum (2003); Middle Assyrian period: Tenu (2009); Neo-Assyrian period: Radner (2014); State and Empire of Assyria in Northeast Syria: Kühne (2013a).
2. The degree of shrinking of the state region during this fragility period is a matter of debate (Kühne 2013a: 480).
3. cf. Tell Ahmar Area C (Jamieson 2012), Nimrud, Fort Shalmaneser (Oates 1959), Tell Shiukh Fawqani (Makinson 2005).

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