

The Collapse of the Assyrian Empire and the Continuity of Ceramic Culture: The Case of the Red House at Tall Sheikh Hamad

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Abstract

The complete ground plan (5400 m²) of the so-called Red House has been excavated at Tall Sheikh Hamad/Dur-Katlimmu on the Habur River in Northern Mesopotamia. Cuneiform tablets can date the period in which the Red House was in use to the reign of the Neo-Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. Large quantities of pottery were found on the floors covered by the destruction debris. Pottery from 90 rooms has provided insight into a wide range of forms and their functions, which occurred simultaneously. The analysis of the stratigraphic sequence covering a time span from the late Neo-Assyrian period (seventh century BC) to the turn of the sixth to the fifth century BC clearly demonstrates that there is continuity in both wares and forms. This result calls for a re-evaluation of Iron Age chronology based on pottery periodisation, especially the differentiation of Neo-Assyrian and 'Post-Assyrian' pottery.

Introduction

The famous ancient capitals Assur, Nimrud and Nineveh are located at the Tigris River. These cities flourished during the Neo-Assyrian period. Around 612 BC the situation changed. After the fall of Nineveh caused by

the Babylonians and Medes there is little evidence for continuity and we can hardly assign textual and archaeological data to this period as Stephanie Dalley, John Curtis and Julian Reade have shown.¹ Thus, the time after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the region of Northern Mesopotamia is what we call a dark age. Owing to the lack of information, it was labelled the 'Post-Assyrian' period.²

The aim of this paper is to discuss what kind of social and cultural transformation took place at Tall Sheikh Hamad, on the banks of the Habur River, caused by the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire and whether the material culture changed. This issue will be discussed considering the recent results of the analysis of the pottery from the so-called Red House.³ The established classification of Iron Age Chronology in Northern Mesopotamia where the pottery is grouped to Iron Age II and Iron Age III, or to Neo-Assyrian and 'Post-Assyrian' material. But this arrangement has to be questioned.⁴

History of research for Iron Age Pottery in Northern Mesopotamia

Excavations of Iron Age sites in northern Mesopotamia have been carried out for about 150 years. Architecture and decorated stone slabs of the Assyrian capitals are well known. Pottery was scarcely considered during these earlier excavations. Most sherds were thrown away. Only some vessels that by chance were in a good state of preservation — that is, intact, complete, or nicely decorated — were kept.

Pottery from accurately documented and well dated contexts was published for the first time after the Second World War. Until today the the 1950s contributions of Joan Oates⁵ to the Town Wall Houses in Nimrud, Arndt Haller⁶ to Assur, and Seton Lloyd and Nuri Gökçe⁷ to Sultantepe belong to the most important references. But a characteristic feature of these publications is that only single pieces were picked out of the entire corpus of pottery. Thus the assemblages are not accurately represented and the frequency of each type is not known.

These three well dated contexts unfortunately all belong more or less to the same period, that is towards the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in the

¹ Dalley 1993, pp. 134–147; Curtis 2003, pp. 157–168; Reade 2003, pp. 149–156.

² Cf. Curtis 1989, pp. 51–52; Wilkinson and Tucker 1995 pp. 100–101.

³ Kreppner 2006.

⁴ See also Makinson 2005, pp. 455–456.

⁵ Oates 1954, pp. 164–167.

⁶ Haller 1954.

⁷ Lloyd and Gökçe 1953, pp. 46–47.

second half of the seventh century BC. Only at Nimrud did Joan Oates publish pottery deriving from two different complexes. The material from the Town Wall Houses is assigned to the end of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, whereas ceramics from the squatter occupation of the Fort Shalmaneser are dated to the period shortly after the collapse.⁸ However, it was not possible to detect significant differences between the two groups. Therefore two possibilities were suggested for interpretation.⁹ First, the squatters used vessels which were produced before the end of the empire, or, second, that the pottery was produced of similar type.

Since the mid-1980s comprehensive publications appeared that analysed the entire assemblage. But the excavated areas at Abu Danné, Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij, and Khirbet Khatunieh are quite small, thus the material consists only of specific functional units and does not represent a wider spectrum of pottery used simultaneously.¹⁰ And the proposed dates have not been confirmed because written evidence was not found.

Varieties in the use of vegetable temper between the two assemblages from Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij led the excavator, John Curtis, to assume a time gap between both. He proposed an eighth century BC date for Qasrij Cliff and a 'Post-Assyrian' date for Khirbat Qasrij. He pointed out that the fabric was an important criterion for this differentiation. He assigned the use of vegetable temper to the Neo-Assyrian period and the lack of vegetable temper to the 'Post-Assyrian' period.¹¹ Arnulf Hausleiter's dissertation¹² and the book edited by Hausleiter and Reiche¹³ on Iron Age Pottery in Northern Mesopotamia collate our knowledge so far. Tony Green's contribution, "Neo-Assyrian v. Post-Assyrian", in particular, points out how much one can argue about the definition of these groups.¹⁴ New evidence was published by Makinson and Luciani (Tell Shiukh Fawqani),¹⁵ Pecorella (Tall Barri),¹⁶ and Jamieson (Tell Ahmar),¹⁷ which points to the continuity of the Late- to the so-called 'Post-Assyrian' material at those specific sites.

However, a commonly accepted concept for a periodisation of Iron Age pottery in Northern Mesopotamia does not yet exist.¹⁸ Owing to these

⁸ Oates 1959, pp. 130–146.

⁹ Oates and Oates 2001, p. 257.

¹⁰ Abu Danné (Tefnin 1980, pp. 1–58; Lebeau 1983), Qasrij Cliff and Khirbet Qasrij (Curtis 1989) and Khirbet Khatunieh (Curtis and Green 1997).

¹¹ Curtis 1989, p. 52.

¹² Hausleiter 1996.

¹³ Hausleiter and Reiche 1999.

¹⁴ Green 1999, pp. 115–116.

¹⁵ Makinson 2005, pp. 411–580; Luciani 2005, pp. 719–996;

¹⁶ Pecorella 2003, p. 497.

uncertainties, the suggested differentiation of Neo-Assyrian and 'Post-Assyrian' pottery according to its fabric must be questioned.

The Red House Pottery

Excavations have been carried out for 30 years at Tall Sheikh Hamad on the Habur River. They are directed by Prof. Hartmut Kühne. He brought to light new data for the time after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire by excavating the so-called Red House.¹⁹ Four cuneiform texts, which refer to the reign of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar II, confirm that the house was certainly in use after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.²⁰

The complete ground plan of the Red House has been unearthed. It covered an area of 5400 sq m and was composed by *ca.* 90 rooms (Fig. 1). Since all rooms have been excavated, the pottery from different functional units such as storage rooms, kitchens or reception halls could be studied as a complete corpus. Next to the Red House was a kiln for pottery production (Fig. 2). This demonstrates that the pottery was still produced during the so-called 'Post-Assyrian' period. The open space ZW where it was located was connected with the room LW of the Red House by a side entrance.

The main phase in which the Red House was in use ended unexpectedly by a violent destruction. Thus pottery was found in large quantities on the floors covered by destruction debris. I chose to single out simultaneously used pottery from the floors by analysing the context. This included the earthen deposits that provided us with very important information on formation processes, and also the connections of floors through the doors of adjoining rooms.

By doing so it was possible to separate out pottery that did not belong to the stratified context such as material from building rubble or pottery from original Red House-floors that were again in use later after the destruction or pottery, which was found in contaminated contexts. This was the case in the courtyards where burnt bricks of the pavements were robbed for a secondary use during later times, causing the earthen deposits to be mingled. Areas from which the pottery was separated out are left white in the plan (Fig. 1).

¹⁷ Jamieson 2000, pp. 259–303.

¹⁸ Makinson 2005, pp. 455–456, recently published a table defining subdivisions of the Iron Age for the region of the 'Upper Euphrates in Syria'.

¹⁹ Kühne 2000, pp. 761–769; 2002, pp. 171–175; Radner 2002.

²⁰ Kühne *et al.* 1993, pp. 75–150.

A huge amount of stratified ceramics has been found broken into pieces. The vessels had been smashed and were found where the pieces had fallen during the destruction. The accompanying photographs show two examples: first, a vessel in the destruction debris in room CW (Fig. 3), and second, smashed pottery in room FW (Fig. 4). Pottery has also been found *in situ*, that is, it was found at the place where it was positioned when the room was in use. Such a situation was found in room PW (Fig. 5).

Taken together, more than 51,000 sherds were found on the floors of the Red House, and all were analysed. The quantity of fragments assigned to vessels used at the time immediately before the destruction totals more than 30,000. Of these, more than 5000 are diagnostics. They were found in the rooms marked black in the accompanying illustrations. All these date to the first half of the sixth century BC.

Stratigraphical Sequence

In addition to the above-mentioned corpus of the Red House, possible ceramic changes over time were studied. Older material from floors of buildings under the Red House was analysed, and younger material from floors of the later squatter occupation, in use after the destruction of the main complex, was also considered. This later material was by far not as rich and numerous as that from the Red House.

Well stratified older pottery was only found in room RR (Fig. 6). This room belongs to an older building that was cut by the Red House.²¹ But this material comes from one room so one must bear in mind that only certain vessel functions from the former household could be studied. This material was in use during the latest part of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

The later material was analysed from a sequence of three floors in the rooms QX and XZ. These floors were in use one after the other after the destruction of the Red House. A chronological fixed point is given by three ostraca bearing Aramaic inscriptions. They were found on the uppermost floor. Wolfgang Röllig dates them to the turn from the sixth to the fifth century BC.²² Thus, this pottery was in use 100 to 150 years *after* the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. One should take into account, however, that this material was used by squatters who lived in provisional dwellings within the ruins of the former Red House. The socio-economic status of those inhabitants had obviously changed.

²¹ Kühne 1993, pp. 75–107.

²² Röllig 2003, pp. 395–402.

The quantity of sherds from the different stratigraphical units is very dissimilar: 32,628 sherds (Red House), as compared to 1,006 (Room RR), 306 (first squatter occupation of the rooms QX and XZ), 230 (second squatter occupation of the rooms QX and XZ), or 109 (third squatter occupation of the rooms QX and XZ) pieces (Tab. 1, 2).

Definition of Wares

The definition of wares is based on the two criteria — raw material and added temper. Surface treatment or decorations were not regarded as criteria for this aim (Tab. 1). Using these criteria 57 wares from Tall Sheikh Hamad were distinguished macroscopically. On the other hand, chemical-mineralogical analyses conducted by Gerwulf Schneider reduced these to six groups.²³

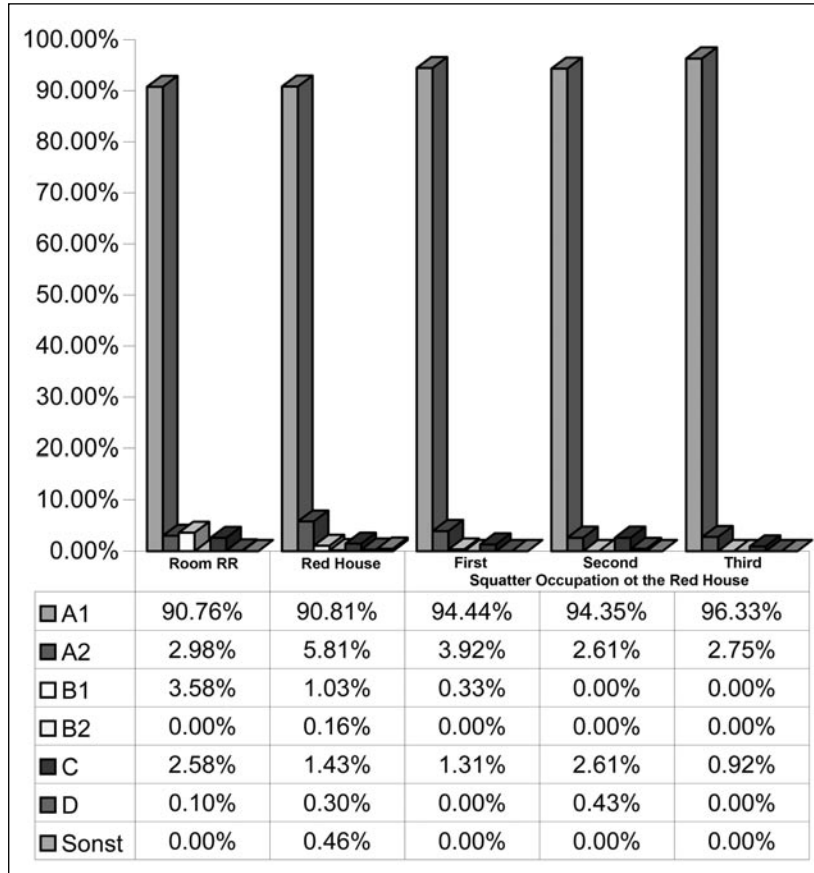
Despite these groupings, the macroscopic attributes and the chemical-mineralogical groups could not be perfectly matched. Ware A1 has a medium to coarse grained clay and straw temper, Ware A2 was manufactured using the same raw material but without straw temper, whereas Ware B1 has a fine grained clay without straw temper. This latter ware is usually called 'palace ware'; but there is also another fine ware with straw temper that was labelled Ware B2. Ware C has a coarse clay and is characterised by coarse white inclusions — quartz or calcite temper. Ware D has coarse black inclusions. Ms. Daszkiewicz (2006) analysed the chemical and mineralogical constituents of cooking pots of wares C and D in some detail, and has discussed that the raw material and the added temper was appropriate for cooking pots.²⁴

Regarding the proportion of wares from these four stratigraphical units the straw-tempered Ware A1 comprises more than 90%. The proportion actually increases in the younger contexts. This result contradicts the view that vegetable temper was used less frequently during the 'Post-Assyrian' period.

The increase in the quantity of Ware A1 can be explained by the commensurate decline of the fine Ware B1 as a result of socio-economic change. Fine ware ran out of use during the squatter occupation, which was characterised by a lower living standard.

²³ Schneider 2006.

²⁴ Daszkiewicz *et al.* 2006.



Tab. 1: Proportion of Wares in the Chronologically Significant Stratigraphical Units

Eye-catching Decoration

In contrast to the high percentage of published pieces of these types, in the Red House ‘red slip’-pottery amounted to no more than 0.13 % of the total assemblage, ‘glazed’ pottery comprised 0.12%, and ‘painted’ pottery was 0.02% of the total. Only the quantity of pottery decorated with incised wavy lines is higher with 2.07% and 674 pieces (Tab. 2). The latter ornamentation is known under the name ‘Sheikh Hamad Ware’. Since the so-called Sheikh Hamad Ware is not common elsewhere it must be regarded as significant for the region where it prevails, and for the time after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire.

In Room RR the lack of pottery bearing these decorations must be explained by the fact that it constitutes material from only one room. Considering the hearth installations this room must have been used as a kitchen. Thus, eye-catching decoration was not kept in this room when it was destroyed.

	Room RR		Red House		Squatter Occupations of the Rooms QX, XZ					
	number	%	number	%	First		Second		Third	
	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%	number	%
number of items	1006		32628		306		230		109	
red slipped	0	0.00%	42	0.13%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
glazed	0	0.00%	38	0.12%	0	0.00%	1	0.43%	1	0.92%
painted	0	0.00%	7	0.02%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
incised wavy lines	0	0.00%	674	2.07%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

Tab. 2: Eye-catching Decoration: Quantity and Proportion

When considering the pottery forms from the Red House, it should be noted that the state of preservation varied a lot. Complete vessels as well as small fragments were found. But it was not possible to assign every rim-form to a known vessel type. Thus, the material was divided into three groups: rim-fragments, rims with identifiable side, and complete vessel-profiles.

The frequency of each rim type was documented. By doing so, frequent types could be distinguished from infrequent types. Within the stratigraphical sequence an analysis of the development of the forms could not be accomplished because the quantities of the material are dissimilar.

It could be confirmed, however, that the most frequent types of pottery from the Red House are exactly those that were found both in the younger and the older stratigraphical units. Thus, a continuity of pottery production is proven from the mid-seventh through the sixth as far as the beginning of the fifth centuries BC.

Conclusions

The results of the analysis of the Red House pottery strongly suggest a re-evaluation of the pottery of the sixth century BC in Northern Mesopotamia — the so-called 'Post-Assyrian' Period. The Red House demonstrates that a high standard residence existed even after the fall of the

Neo-Assyrian Empire. By comparing pottery from the Red House with the published Neo-Assyrian material it became clear that there are limits in interpretation. Well dated pottery is only known by single pieces. Full material was analysed from limited excavation areas with uncertain and controversial dating. Therefore, the frequency of specific types over time could not be studied.

An Iron Age pottery assemblage of a completely excavated and well dated household of higher standard from Northern Mesopotamia has now been analysed for the first time. The study has shown that differences in forms — commonly assigned to different time periods — do occur at the same time in the Red House. The state of research does not allow a periodisation until comparable data are excavated and published covering the ninth, eighth, seventh or the fifth centuries BC. Probably it will be revealed that during this period the development of forms and wares took place slower than it has been assumed so far. Contrary to various assumptions²⁵ the clay used for pottery continued to be prepared with straw temper well into later periods and the forms known from the seventh century were also used during the sixth century BC.

The four cuneiform texts in Assyrian script dating to the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II prove that Assyrians inhabited the Red House during the time of the Neo-Babylonian Empire. The fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire neither interrupted ceramic production, nor caused a change of wares and forms. Pottery of Neo-Babylonian style was not introduced.

On the other hand, the socio-economic transformation from the high standard 'Post-Assyrian' Red House to the later, humbler squatter occupation was recognisable in the pottery assemblages. The pottery associated with the latest squatter occupation dating to the beginning of the fifth century BC — that is, the time of the Achaemenid Empire — consists of wares and forms usually assigned to the Neo-Assyrian period.

This shows that forms and wares from contexts without exact dating are usually assigned to the well known periods, as in the given example, to the time of the Neo-Assyrian Empire. But material culture did not change so fast. Thus, with these usual attributions, well known periods appear brighter and more active, whereas transitional periods and dark ages remain obscure.

In my opinion, a significant change of ceramic culture — in wares and forms — cannot as yet be linked to the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire for the region of Northern Mesopotamia. In any case, the continuity of

²⁵ Wilkinson and Tucker 1995, pp. 100–102.

ceramic culture in Tall Sheikh Hamad demonstrates that a differentiation of pottery to Iron Age II and Iron Age III or Neo-Assyrian and 'Post-Assyrian' with the borderline at 612 BC should not longer be maintained. It is not a meaningful distinction.

If the period after 612 BC is to be labelled, one should avoid a term like 'Post-Assyrian', which implies a change of material culture, or even ethnic groups. It should refer only to historical changes because it is the time after the fall of the Neo-Assyrian Empire in Northern Mesopotamia.

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Fig. 1: The Red House of Tall Sheikh Hamad: rooms with stratified pottery are marked black



Fig. 2: Kiln for pottery production next to the Red House



Fig. 3: A vessel in the destruction debris in room CW

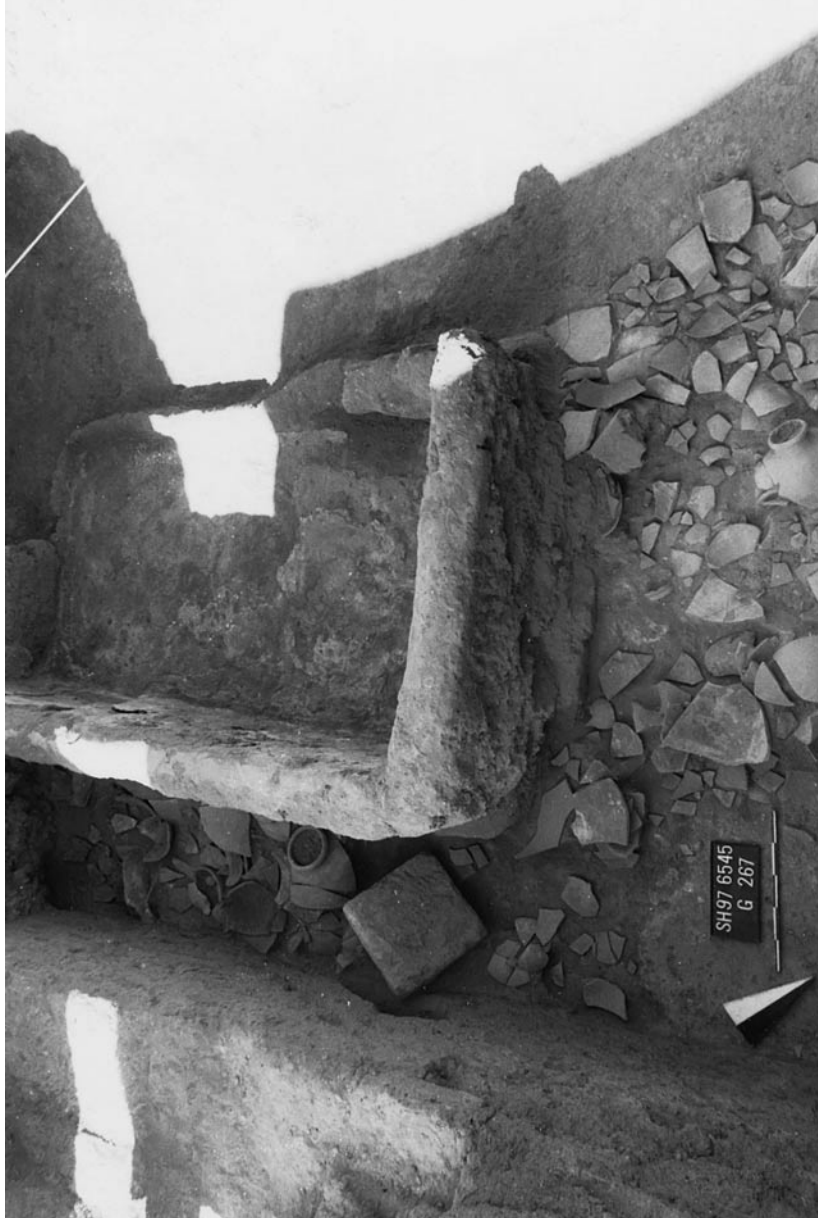


Fig. 4: Smashed pottery in room FW



Fig. 5: Pottery found *in situ* in room PW



Fig. 6: Stratified pottery from Room RR under the Red House