

UNDERSTANDING SYMBOLS: PUTTING MEANING INTO THE PAINTED POTTERY OF PREHISTORIC NORTHERN MESOPOTAMIA

Stuart Campbell

Like several other contributors to this volume, some of the first classes I took as an undergraduate were taught by Eddie Peltenburg and, again in common with many others, I have worked on projects with him in both Cyprus and Syria over many years since then. It would be difficult to either quantify or overestimate the extent to which I have been influenced by him. It is both a pleasure and an honour to make a contribution to this volume.

The painted ceramics of the late Neolithic in northern Mesopotamia are some of the most elaborate and attractive decorated pottery in prehistory. The overwhelming majority of the decoration is geometric, sometimes with what seems like an endless parade of motifs and subtle variations. Rare examples stand out as very different, with much more naturalistic decoration depicting people, animals, structures and artifacts in scenes whose power and significance seems to us to be much more immediately recognisable. This paper argues that much of this decoration, both abstract and figurative, carried meaning and that these meanings endowed the ceramics with a social agency of their own (*cf* Gell 1998). Understanding the ways in which the agency could be exercised can provide a key to understanding how society of late Neolithic northern Mesopotamia was constituted.

Over a period from just before 6000 cal BC to a little after 5000 cal BC, the pottery of north Mesopotamia is characterised by extensive and sometimes elaborate painted decoration. Although it has traditionally been divided into different cultures or phases, the Samarran, Halaf and Ubaid, it may be more profitable to think of it as a broad ceramic phase characterised by that domination of painted decoration, reflecting both a stylistic expression that came into use *c.* 6200 cal BC and declined *c.* 4,750 cal BC, “l’ère de la céramique peinte” (Huot 1994, 63) and the social milieu within which it had meaning and significance.

In the past, the painted decoration of this general phase has primarily been analysed and interpreted typologically and chronologically. Decoration has been used to define cultural or chronological groupings, and it has been sub-divided into many individual motifs which have been examined for their symmetry. Similarity in motif assemblages has explicitly or implicitly been used to look at group identity and differentiation. Little attention has been paid, however, to what was actually meant by the symbolism of individual motifs or combinations of motifs and the degree of sophistication or convention in the messages that the decoration could convey, although this is key to understanding how decoration was both used and adopted. In other words, form has been prioritised at the expense of meaning.

Although it will remain impossible to comprehend fully exact meanings from prehistoric material, it is perhaps possible to gain insights into the types of meaning that were present and something of how they functioned within a wider system of symbolic communication. The contrasts and links between the predominant abstract, geometric decoration and the much rarer, naturalistic decoration can act as a powerful tool to gain conceptual leverage on this wider system.

Throughout the period, most of the decoration on the painted pottery is geometric and abstract (*e.g.* Fig. 18.1). Here I wish to explore one possible way of understanding the choices, combination and meanings of the geometrical and apparently abstract motifs as symbols that, at times at least, had explicit meanings, both individually and in groups. The much rarer examples of decoration with depictions of naturalistic scenes contrast strongly with this predominant geometric decoration. In archaeological publications, the two categories of decoration have generally been considered

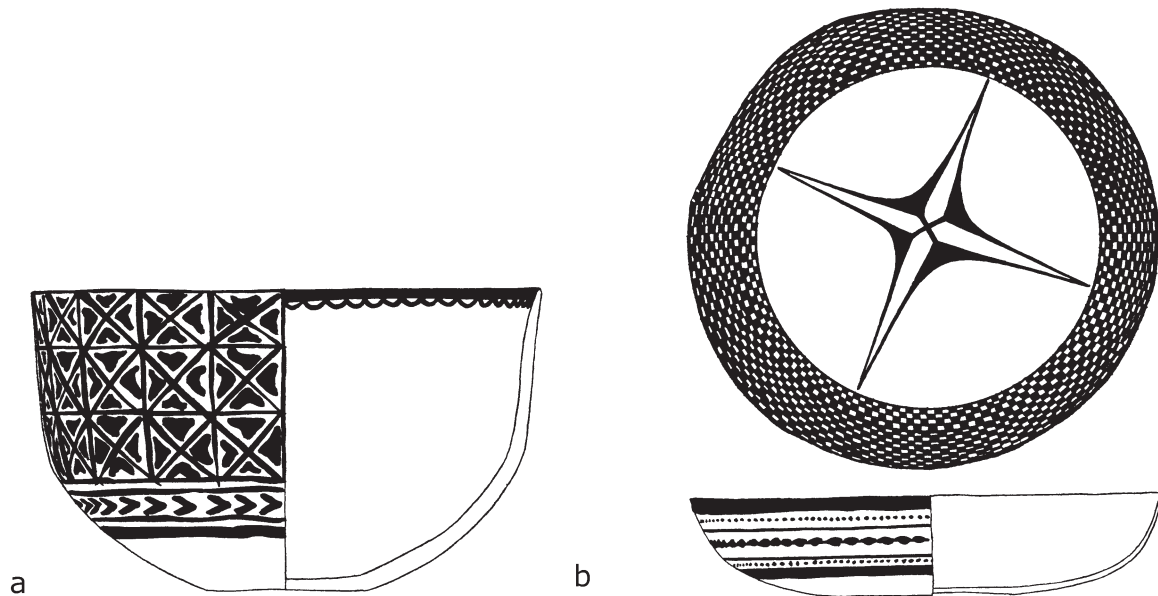


Fig. 18.1 Typical Halaf vessels from Arpachiyah decorated with geometric motifs (after Mallowan and Cruickshank Rose 1935, fig. 60, no. 5 and fig. 61, no. 2).

separately, with the more naturalistic depictions often separated out from the rest of the ceramics as prize finds. I wish instead to explore the way in which the two types of decoration may be understood as different aspects of the same system of communication with a complementary role in pre-urban social interaction and integration.

Although it is certainly true that there may have been considerable variations in both time and space, for simplicity I will make little effort here to incorporate regional or chronological subtleties. Most of my examples come from the pottery manufactured and decorated in the Halaf style. This is largely due to convenience.

There have, of course, been other approaches to this challenge. Mallowan famously outlined a sequence of development for the bucrania motif, running from naturalistic to highly abstract and argued that a similar process of stylisation may have occurred with other motifs as well (Mallowan and Cruickshank Rose 1935, 154–165). Where the complete process of schematisation is not attested, this is difficult to demonstrate for many motifs and, in any case, need not correlate with significance or meaning. Even where motifs represent abstractions of what was once naturalistic, they need not have deeply symbolic meanings; for example, the suggestion that has been made many times that cross-hatching may originate as an attempt to depict basketry (e.g. Mallowan and Cruickshank Rose 1935, 153; Wengrow 2001). If this suggestion has merit, the link might be deeply meaningful or it might be relatively trivial—or it might point to meanings that were shared between different media.

There was probably not a simple way that meaning was

communicated. Decoration on pots doubtless conveyed information in different ways and at multiple levels. Different aspects of the decoration might possess very different significance. Thus, not only have various analytical approaches been taken; they may also help reconstruct different types of meaning. Hole, Bernbeck and Nieuwenhuyse have explored the significance of the structure of the decorative scheme (Hole 1984; Bernbeck 1994; 1999; Nieuwenhuyse 2007). Elements of composition, such as symmetry and repetition, may have been important (e.g. von Wickede 1986; Melville 2005). The analysis of individual motifs themselves has a particularly detailed history of study (e.g. LeBlanc and Watson 1973; Davidson 1977; Campbell 1992; Irving 2001). Each approach may be seen as complementary to the others, by focussing on different aspects of the design. However, all of these studies have emphasised typologies and generalised structure. Although meaning has been considered, it has been treated as a rather general concept, often in a manner drawing implicitly or explicitly on similar approaches to the analysis of style (Conkey and Hastorf 1990). These approaches can certainly help us understand both aspects of identity and the ways in which a potter conceptualised and executed a design. They tell us less about what meanings these elements may have carried. Although they have shed light on important aspects of the decoration of pottery in northern Mesopotamia, they have not generally been part of an effort to construct a general theory of what decoration meant and how it functioned as a mechanism of social communication.

Schmandt-Besserat has recently suggested that compositions of pre-4th millennium painted pottery focussed on filling space according to rules of aesthetics, whether the compositions used geometric or naturalistic decoration (2007, 5–22). Although she acknowledges that prehistoric decoration carried meaning, she suggests that it was generalised rather than something which could be complex and dynamic. She draws on parallels with language, especially written language, to suggest that scenes are only explicitly narrative in the 4th and 3rd millennia. Thus “... preliterate pottery composition formed an all-over pattern meant to be apprehended as a whole, or *globally*, those of the literate period were to be viewed *analytically*” (2007, 24) and “Preliterate pottery paintings could only *evoke* an idea” (2007, 25). In contrast, I would argue that it is not that Neolithic decoration could not support a narrative but that the narrative needed to be deciphered and explained; that the process of extracting and recreating meaning would have been a process of social interaction.

Nieuwenhuyse has recently proposed such a theory (2007, 206–212). His interpretation emphasises structured sets of oppositions between bounded-unbounded, naturalistic-abstract, repetitive-discontinuous designs. Designs with bounded, continuous and geometrical attributes are suggested to have had an ‘outward’ social orientation while the unbounded, discontinuous and ‘figurative’ styles were directed ‘inward’ at local and domestic activities and meanings. While there is much to embrace in this proposal, it should also perhaps be noted that the interpretation of painted, naturalistic decoration on pottery depends heavily on the interpretation of representational depictions on other media, such as wall paintings, seals, figurines and applied decoration on pots (Nieuwenhuyse 2007, 210). Comparisons across media have been neglected in the past, so this inclusive approach is very welcome. It does not necessarily follow, however, that the same rules and audiences were observed in all cases; painted pottery may have had different considerations. However, the discussion presented here is not incompatible with Nieuwenhuyse’s proposals.

In the rare cases where naturalistic or figurative decoration is present on the late Neolithic pottery of north Mesopotamia, it has often been interpreted in isolation. A range of interpretations have been put forward for different examples. In contrast to the geometric decoration, it has usually been assumed that figurative designs did carry important social meanings. Thus representational designs have been identified as carrying ritual meaning, including the depiction of deities and supernatural beings (Ippolitonis-Srika 1990; 1996; Breniquet 1992; Forest 1996; Cauvin 2000). In a stimulating analysis, Garfinkel interpreted a series of human figures as dancers (Garfinkel 2003).

Despite their immediate impact on the observer, it is probably a mistake to treat the naturalistic designs as completely separate from the more general geometric

motifs. Some types of decoration, such as bucrania, can be considered in both categories as it is used along a spectrum from naturalistic to stylised. Furthermore, there is little evidence that the prehistoric potters maintained a rigid division. Almost all pots with representational designs also have elements of geometric decoration, sometimes used to frame naturalistic scenes but perhaps often used to reinforce the fact that the pot remains a pot by retaining the most typical geometric elements, such as a band around the vessel rim. It may be profitable to explore a more integrated approach where naturalistic and geometric decorations are not seen as completely separate.

“Visual representation refers both to the act of portraying, symbolizing or presenting the likeness of something, and to the use of the resultant image “to ‘re-present’, imagine, describe, define, understand, fix, construct, organise, regulate and even transform the world as we perceive it” (Skeates 2007, 199). Given an appropriate social context, both geometric and naturalistic motifs can function in this way. The difference between the abstract image and the naturalistic example can be one of degree—the representation in the former case may be more formalised, more embedded in convention and also potentially hidden. The key constituent of the abstract image may not be obvious, with less meaningful elaboration hiding the more significant core that delivers the real meaning. These meanings can be overt but they can also be obscured and elaborated by the addition of further elements. This places a great deal of emphasis on the social context in which decoration was created and displayed.

The range of meanings encoded in the decoration of a vessel was undoubtedly complex, and its comprehension was equally certainly dependent on the observer. More broadly, the meaning would have been created by the setting—the occasion of consumption of food and drink, the participants and their interaction. The meanings would have emerged from social discourse (*cf* Bernbeck 1999), both spoken and unspoken. Some elements of the meaning would certainly have operated on the level of familiarity and identification, simply on the level of ‘is my pottery like your pottery?’. Other meanings might well have been associated with function, both of the vessel and the way it was used, and were possibly reinforced by variables such as types of food and cooking methods.

However, it is possible to argue that the combination of vessel shape, structure of the decoration and the particular motifs might carry more explicit meanings, perhaps associated with specific concepts and narratives. The clearest indication of this comes from the exceptional vessel/figurine from the Halaf levels of Yarim Tepe II (Fig. 18.2). This figurine was found in a pit, broken in pieces and associated with burning (Merpert and Munchaev 1987). It seems possible that it had actually been treated in a way that is analogous to human funerary treatment, which also some-

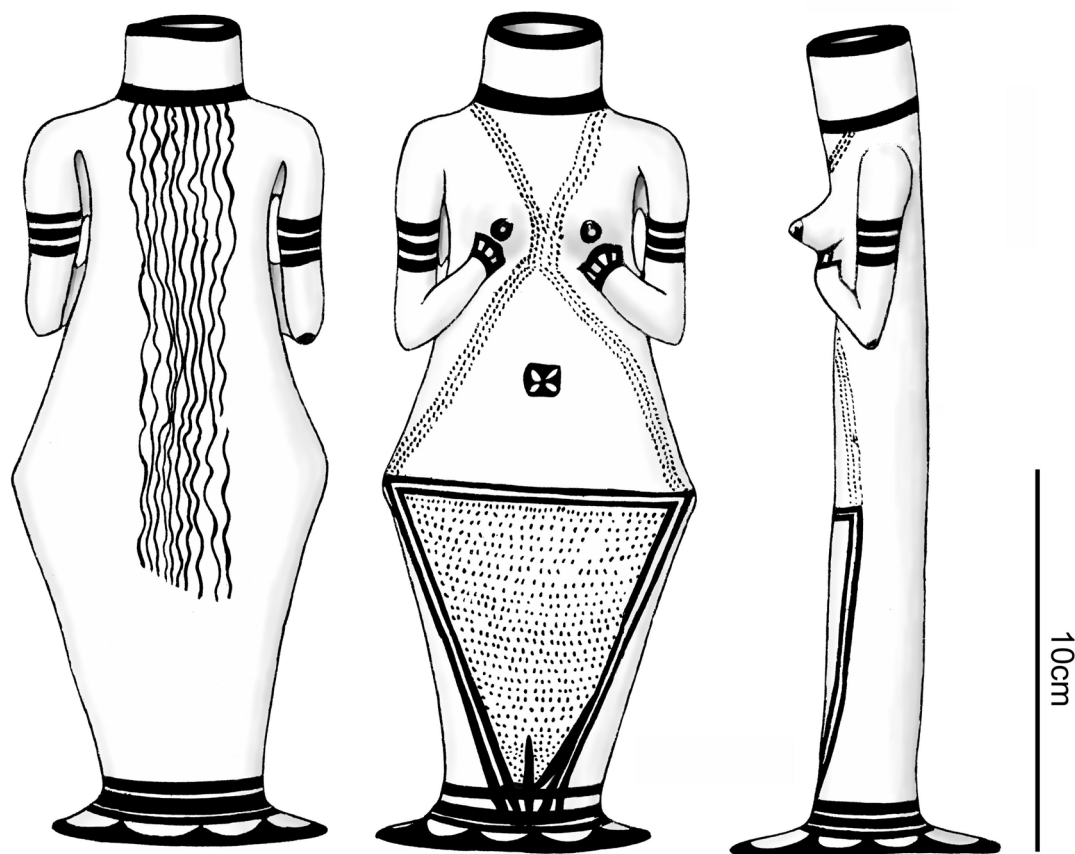


Fig. 18.2 Vessel figurine from Yarim Tepe II (after Munchaev and Merpert 1981, fig. 98).

times has elements of burial, fragmentation and burning (Campbell 2008). The removable head was not found with the rest of the pot, perhaps because it was made of organic material or perhaps because it was deliberately separated from the body, a practice which could also parallel the occasional special treatment given to human skulls. It does not seem contentious to argue that it was a figurine with high symbolic value, which had a use in specific rituals in which presumably both the ability to fill the figurine/vessel with liquid and its removable head would have had a significant role. It is probable that it represented a specific mythical or supernatural being who would have figured in narratives of importance in systems of society and belief.

Assuming the figurine/vessel did have an important status, it follows that the decoration on this vessel is not random but had been selected for very specific reasons that may have amplified the meanings attached to the person or being represented. Some of the decoration is broadly naturalistic, such as the hair and possible armbands, and may be associated with the woman depicted in the vessel or the role that she performed. The elements of the figurine/vessel that are particularly relevant here are the ones that aren't obviously naturalistic elements although it is possible that they were associated with body paint or tattooing. These

are motifs which had been added with particular purpose and to add particular meanings to the figure. They were both relevant to the person represented and conveyed additional information that was probably quite explicit in intent and meaning. In particular, the significant motifs are the rosette or flower depicted in the navel and the dotting that fills the exaggerated pubic area. Furthermore, although the overall artefact is very naturalistic, there are no feet or legs. This is not simply a technical requirement as a roughly contemporary figurine/vessel at Domuztepe has very well modelled legs and feet (Campbell 2004). On the Yarim Tepe II figurine, instead of feet, there is a flange with a row of upturned triangle motifs running around it.

These non-naturalistic elements are particularly interesting because they also occur in the geometric decoration on pots that otherwise would not appear particularly unusual. Although all the elements do occur in isolation, they are used in the same combinations with surprising frequency. Rosettes probably occur most frequently on Halaf pottery in association with areas filled with dots, either in alternate panels or chequer board patterns. This repeats the association of the rosette or flower with dots in the pubic triangle of the figurine/vessel at Yarim Tepe II. Strikingly, one of the main vessel types that often has alternating panels of rosettes

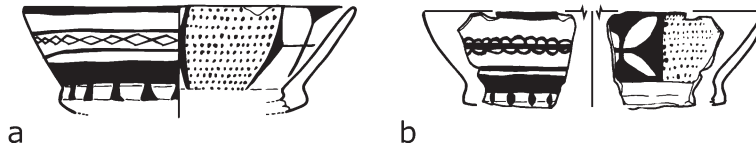


Fig. 18.3 Bowls with flanged bases, rosettes and dots from Umm Qseir (after Tsuneki and Miyake 1998, fig. 26, nos 1 and 9).

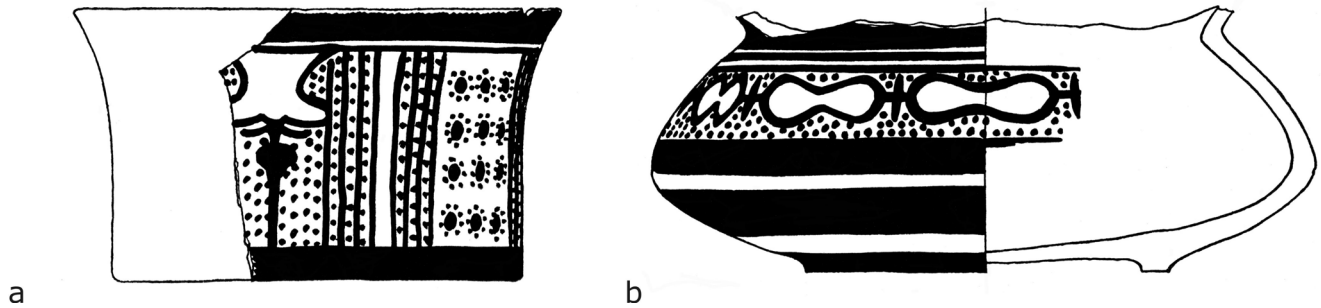


Fig. 18.4 Bucrania motifs on Halaf pottery from Arpachiyah (after Mallowan and Cruickshank Rose 1935, fig. 76, nos 2 and 4).

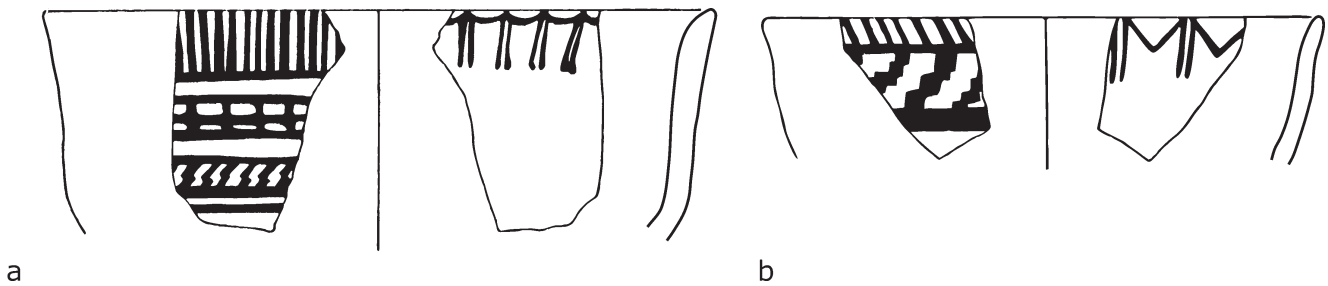


Fig. 18.5 The 'dancing ladies' motif on the interior rim of bowls from Khirbet Garsour. [source?]

and dots along the interior of the rim also has a flanged base which can be decorated with up-turned triangle motifs (Fig. 18.3). Examples can be cited from both Yarim Tepe II and Umm Qseir in north-east Syria (Tsuneki and Miyake 1998, fig. 26, nos 1, 9). I would suggest that the pots with the same combination of motifs that we see on the Yarim Tepe II figurine/vessel may either draw on precisely the same meanings or even represent the same woman, whether supernatural or mythological, in a much more abstract form. The decoration needs to be understood as partaking in the same mythologies or narratives as the being represented by the figurine.

While this example is outstanding, there are other indications that some motifs may carry specific meanings. The most obvious is the well known bucrania (Mallowan and Cruickshank Rose 1935, 154–165). Although the bulls' horns are often highly schematic, they still appear on a very wide range of Halaf pottery in a form recognisable to us, almost always embedded in otherwise geometric decoration (Fig. 18.4). Although they have received less attention, a similar

spectrum running from naturalistic to stylised can be observed in other motifs such as mouflon horns and birds which are also most commonly integrated with abstract motifs. Similarly, the distinctive motifs that appear round the interior rims of both Samarran and early Halaf pottery and are generally known as 'dancing ladies' are often seen in various stages of stylisation (Fig. 18.5). It is possible that the ultimate level of stylisation of this motif is the simple swags that are the most frequent decoration on the same part of the vessel on late Halaf pottery (e.g. Fig. 18.1, a). While meaning might have been replaced by convention during the long process of abstraction and schematisation, I would suggest that it is more likely that the meaning was retained but no longer required the full form to be depicted or perhaps even understood. The process of abstraction may well have taken other more naturalistic depictions and hidden them in geometric motifs whose symbolism cannot be accessed by archaeologists but may have been no less potent by being obscured.

This pattern of encoded meanings can possibly be extended further. Some of the classic Halaf patterns are

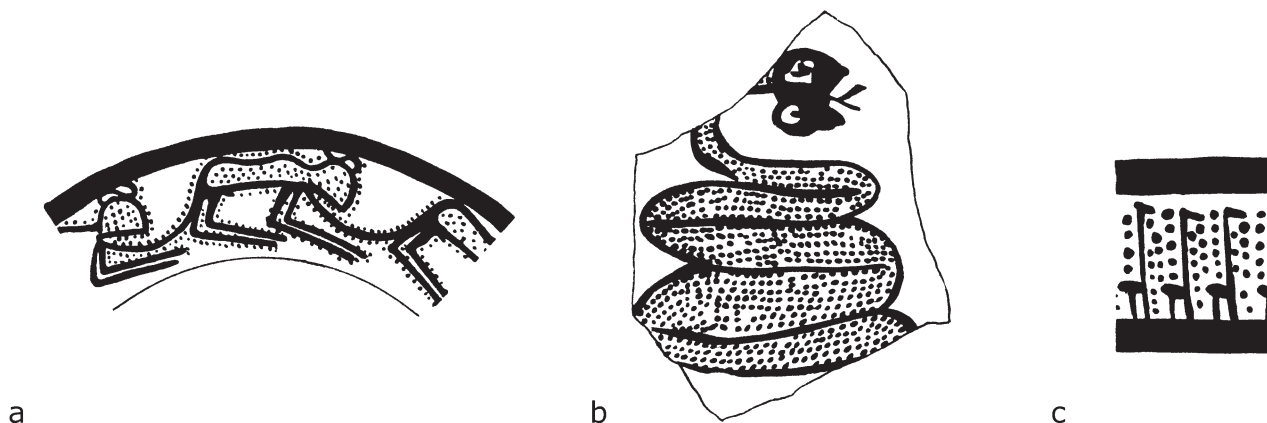


Fig. 18.6 Motifs showing animals on Halaf pottery at Arpachiyah (after Mallowan and Cruickshank Rose 1935, fig. 77: 1, 9 and 16).

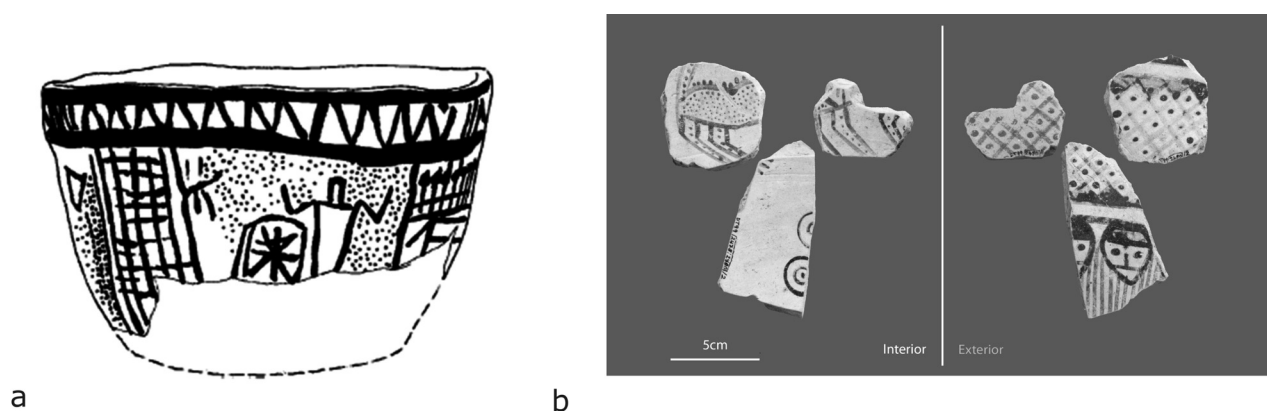


Fig. 18.7 Naturalistic scenes on Halaf pottery from (a) Tell Halaf (after von Oppenheim 1943); and (b) Domuztepe (photo by the author).

made up of dots (see the rather different discussion in Nieuwenhuyse 2007, 207). Dots, however, tend to occur only in particular places, sometimes in combination with other geometric motifs but particularly in association with depictions of animals and humans (e.g. Figs 18.4, 18.6 and 18.7 a). The appearance of dots on the Yarim Tepe II figurine/vessel is again relevant. In all these cases, the dots appear as a secondary or background element. They may be adding meaning or value to the primary element, perhaps a concept of animation or perhaps drawing attention to it as a major actor in some otherwise hidden narrative. Abstract but meaningful decoration need not always derive from a naturalistic original.

Although there are hints that suggest the significance of some motifs, most of the meanings must inevitably escape archaeologists. Nonetheless, based on the examples cited, it seems possible that much of the apparently abstract, geometric decoration may have had more or less complex meanings. On one level, pottery decoration may simply have been about the familiar (*i.e.* isochrestic meanings; see Sackett 1990). On another level, explicit meanings could be

decoded and used to convey social narratives—discourses that could link events and episodes in socially significant ways, and that encapsulated ways of understanding the world, society and the place of the individual or group within it. These narratives might embody folklore, dreams and the everyday experience of the world; frequently they might have mythological or supernatural elements.

Because of the degree of abstraction in most of the decoration, meaning may often have been relatively fixed, imposing a high level of convention so that it might have been best used to relate established themes. Elements might also be juxtaposed to challenge existing narratives and create new variants, but this understanding might only be possible when there was also a personal narrative to explain what might otherwise have been simply odd. Certainly the use of conventional elements would have constrained the introduction of novel subjects and limited the scope for new narratives to be introduced. Abstract, geometric motifs therefore may have functioned to reinforce or modify social conventions, not to initiate new understandings of the world.

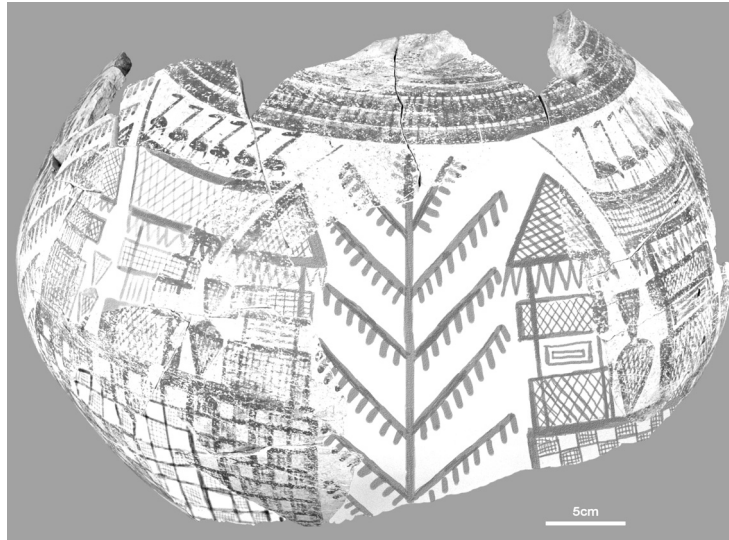


Fig. 18.8 Depiction of houses on a Halaf pot from Domuztepe (photo by the author; decoration is partially reconstructed based on repeating elements).

A possible context of use can be seen in the highly decorated *chichi* beer bowls in Ecuadorian Amazon, the creation and decoration of which is a critical aspect of a wife's role (Bowser 2000). The abstract decoration on the vessels represents features of mythology, including spirits, animals, plants and stars as well as family relationships and the connection between a woman and her dream world. "The key symbols of female identity in Achuar and Quichua belief systems – manioc, pottery clay, garden soil, and the garden spirit – are linked through language, myth, and song . . . On a daily basis, a woman's act of serving *chicha* in a pottery bowl to her husband or brother makes reference to this cluster of key symbols" (Bowser 2000, 228). Within this framework, designs are deeply personal and individual. Innovations and interpretation of designs are an active topic of discussion by both men and women.

In the prehistoric pottery of Mesopotamia, extensive naturalistic decoration is unusual. As already discussed, it is most often absorbed into the geometric patterns on vessels. The more striking examples of naturalistic decoration are very different. Not only is the design more obviously representational but the structure is usually much more open (e.g. Fig. 18.7). Large areas of the vessel can be filled and different naturalistic elements are usually combined to create scenes, such as the combination of houses, birds and trees (e.g. Fig. 18.8).

While some of this might simply be style relating to an individual potter, perhaps demonstrating technical ability, I propose that more often its function may have been to introduce new types of meanings and new narratives which could not be created using the more stylised geometric motifs. Because these narratives were new, they had to be made much more explicit. Naturalistic decoration therefore

may have functioned to introduce new social narratives, and to replace and extend existing social conventions. The depiction of naturalistic scenes, including people, animals and places, might have been associated with control. Representational images can be powerful and dangerous, and the vessels carrying these depictions may have been highly active social agents in themselves.

In time, as the new narratives themselves became conventional, the naturalistic depictions had the potential to become more abstract and perhaps eventually be absorbed in the much larger and more common category of abstract, stylised or geometric designs.

The power of innovation may have been significant. Not only may the depiction of naturalistic scenes have created powerful objects, but it could also have been a direct challenge to conventional social narratives. As a powerful mechanism through which convention could be challenged, it might have constituted a threat to established cosmologies and social order. Consequently, its use might only have been open to certain individuals acting in particular contexts.

While naturalistic motifs are generally very rare throughout the period, there is one substantial context at Domuztepe where they are remarkably common. This is the 'Ditch', which is not in fact a single feature as the name suggests but a long series of linear cuts and re-cuts along an axis of c. 30 m. Although the activity may have continued for well over 100 years, most of the pottery in the refuse that made up the fill of the 'Ditch' seems to be Halaf Ia in date. What is remarkable is the quantity of naturalistic decoration, to the extent that it actually dominates the pottery assemblage. While examples occur with apparently headless bodies (Campbell 2004), dancing ladies (Campbell 2008, fig. 2, no. 4), animals and many other motifs, it is the depictions

Geometric/Abstract	Naturalistic/representational
Common	Very rare and exceptional
Used in social contexts with active set of meanings that could relate to personal histories, storytelling and/or mythologies.	Used in social contexts with active set of meanings that could relate to personal histories, storytelling and/or mythologies.
Encoding of meanings is inflexible and with a framework of convention.	Draws on pre-existing encoding of meanings by use of some geometric decoration but not constrained by it.
Can be used to modify or challenge old narratives through innovative juxtaposition but within existing framework.	Potential to create completely new narratives and meanings
Reinforces existing framework.	Potential to challenge and transform existing framework
May suggest common cosmologies and shared social narratives within area of use, which is sometimes very wide.	Understanding may be very contextual and local to particular regions in which new narratives appear.

Table 18.1 [author to provide caption]

that show houses with trees standing between them and usually birds perched on the roofs (Fig. 18.8) that are the most common, with perhaps 20 or more vessels carrying variants of this scene.

We need to excavate more extensively to fully understand the contemporary pottery at Domuztepe. However, it seems probable that the pottery in the ‘Ditch’ represents a specific context of use, the refuse from which was disposed of in one location, perhaps because it was in some way ‘dangerous’ or ‘powerful’ and needed to be controlled after its use and breakage. This may suggest a particular domain within which new social narratives were being advanced or an authority which was using pottery decoration as an active agent of change.

If the interpretation proposed above is correct, we can see the painted decoration on the pottery of the late Neolithic in north Mesopotamia from a new perspective, as part of a system of communication where vessels gained agency that was created and deciphered through social narratives. This gives the ceramics a significant and active role in the way in which society functioned and the ways that social conventions were conveyed and enforced. Although both abstract, geometric decoration and representational designs functioned in ways that were closely related, they may have represented opposite ends of the same system, with the ability to convey different types of meanings (Table 18.1). By being more standardised and representing accepted cosmologies, the stylised, geometric motifs may have been meaningful over much wider regions. While this correlates with the wide spread of certain motif combinations, such as the association of flowers and dots or the appearance of ‘dancing ladies’, it also poses the question of the extent to which stylistic similarities in pottery decoration reflect shared social narratives and mythologies. If the more naturalistic decoration was used to convey new narratives, it may have been much more local in impact, perhaps requiring

more verbal interpretation, and possibly reflecting the intent of individuals or small corporate groups to introduce new ways of understanding the world.

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NOTES TO AUTHOR

- 1) Melville 2005 needs place and publisher. Fig. 9 has been retitled Table 1 (now 18.1) as it's tabular rather than figurative; caption needed for this table
- 2) source needed for illustration Fig. 18.5.