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Feasting in the Steppe - Late Neolithic ceramic change and the rise of the Halaf

Olivier Nieuwenhuyse, Leiden

Abstract

The *Transitional* or *Proto-Halaf* stage stimulates a re-evaluation of some of the basic concepts that we archaeologists employ to envisage the Late Neolithic, in particular that of an archaeological culture. The traditional framework for the later Neolithic remains strongly culture-historical, implicitly assuming homogeneous bounded entities such as the Hassuna, Samarra or Halaf culture. These terms are misleading when it comes to understanding Late sixth Millennium BC societies in the Near East. Using the regional perspective of Tell Sabi Abyad, I illustrate a gradual, progressive series of ceramic-technological and stylistic changes that ultimately resulted in Halaf-style ceramics. Contrary to what still appears to be the commonly accepted scholarly consensus, the changes that we observe in the Jazira were part of processes that also incorporated the geographical areas traditionally ascribed to the Hassuna and Samarra cultures of northern and central Iraq.

Keywords: Late Neolithic, Halaf, culture concept, ceramics.

Cultures in the Late Neolithic

Perhaps the most pervasive difficulty we currently face in the Late Neolithic archaeology of the Near East is that of terminology and classification. To a large degree this is an empirical issue, which has to do with control over absolute dating[1] and understanding ceramic technologies and styles.[2] What is termed Dark-Faced Burnished Ware at one site may mean something quite different at another. Different scholars hold widely different views on what constitutes Samarra or Hassuna pottery, what might be the relationships between these two categories, or how they relate to northern Syrian or southeastern Anatolian ceramic traditions.[3] Huge amounts of work remain to be done in these respects.

However, the issue quickly moves beyond pottery-typological studies. It may be argued that the very concepts we employ to construct the Late Neolithic are problematic. As scholars have lamented, there is a persistent tendency amongst many Near Eastern prehistorians to think about the later Neolithic in terms of regionally bounded, homogeneous entities.[4] We are probaby all familiar with textbooks on the prehistory of the ancient Near East that present the long Late

[1] See Cruells, this volume.

[2] See Robert *et al.*, this volume, LeMiere and Picon, this volume.

[3] See Bernbeck, this volume, Tekin, this volume.

[4] P.M.M.G. Akkermans 1997, 'Old and New Perspectives on the Origins of the Halaf Culture', in: Rouault O. and Wäfler, M. (eds.), *La Djéziré et l'Euphrate syriens de la Protohistoire à la fin du second millénaire av. J.-C.*, Paris, Editions Récherches Civilizations: 55-68, P.M.M.G. Akkermans and G. Schwartz 2003, *The*

Neolithic period (ca. 6900-5300 cal. BC) in the form of culturally distinct, regionally bounded archaeological cultures. Recent work has in fact increased the number of culture-historical entities to be placed on our distribution maps. For the rolling steppes of the northern *Jazirah*, the geographic space covering northern Syria, southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq, which is where we can presently follow the gradual emergence of the Halaf, we may now distinguish the Pre-Halaf, Pre-Proto-Hassuna, Proto-Hassuna, Altmonochrome, Hassuna, Samarra, and, ultimately, the Halaf cultures.

In theory, these cultural entities are deemed to be polythetic: they are made up of multiple aspects of their material culture.[5] The Halaf culture is an excellent example: the «Halaf package» supposedly includes distinct types of pottery, types of architecture and settlement organization, the use of stamp seals, and a particular mode of subsistence.[6] In practice, much of this framework is based upon pottery: our perception of clear differences between the ceramics attributed to each entity. Thus, in the present consensus, the Pre-Halafians occupied northern Syria (the Balikh), the Proto-Hassunans northeastern Syria (the Khabur) and northern Iraq, the Hassunans followed upon the Proto-Hassunans in northern Iraq, while meanwhile the socio-economically advanced Samarrans occupied central Iraq. The Halaf culture, in this view, replaced the Pre-Halaf and Proto-Hassuna and Hassuna cultures, while remaining distinct from the Samarrans.

Although most scholars accept that there was at least some overlap between these culture areas, most would also argue that the variation *within* each of them was less important than variation *between* them. We have been trained to think of the Late Neolithic in terms of regional «core areas», to be kept analytically distinct from «peripheral areas» receiving occasional influences from the core. The distinction between a Halaf core area in northern Syria and Iraq versus a «Halaf-influenced» province in western Syria offers a good example.[7] The polythetic concept of a culture has, of course, been most succinctly formulated by David Clarke.[8] I would argue that it is Clarke's culture concept, strongly skewed towards pottery style, that ultimately lies at the basis of much

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Archaeology of Syria: From Complex Hunter-Gatherers to Early Urban Societies (ca.16,000-300 BC), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, R. Bernbeck 1994, *Die Auflösung der häuslichen Produktionsweise*, Berlin, Dietrich Reimer Verlag, S. Campbell 1992, *Culture, Chronology and Change in the Later Neolithic of North Mesopotamia*, Edinburgh, Ph.D. thesis University of Edinburgh, S. Campbell 1998, 'Problems of Definition: the Origins of the Halaf in North Iraq', in: Lebeau M. (ed.*), About Subartu. Studies devoted to Upper Mesopotamia*, Turnhout, Brepols (*Subartu* IV): 39-52, O.P. Nieuwenhuyse 2007, *Plain and Painted Pottery. The Rise of Late Neolithic Ceramic Styles on the Syrian and Northern Mesopotamian Plains*, Turnhout, Brepols (Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities).

[5] D. Clarke 1968, *Analytical Archaeology*, London, Methuen.

[6] P.M.M.G. Akkermans 1993, *Villages in the Steppe - Later Neolithic Settlement and Subsistence in the Balikh Valley, Northern Syria*, Michigan, Ann Arbor (International Monographs in Prehistory): 3, S. Campbell 1992, *Culture, Chronology and Change in the Later Neolithic of North Mesopotamia*, Edinburgh, Ph.D. thesis University of Edinburgh.: 5, R. Matthews 2003: *The Archaeology of Mesopotamia. Theories and Approaches*, London, Routledge 21.

[7] T. E. Davidson 1977, *Regional Variation within the Halaf Culture*, Edinburgh, Ph.D. thesis University of Edinburgh.

[8] D. Clarke 1968 *Analytical Archaeology*, London, Methuen.

of our present culture-historical framework for the Late Neolithic of the Near East (Fig 1).

Quite recently a number of scholars have strongly argued in favour of pottery-based culture areas and cultural «frontiers» in the Late Neolithic. For instance, Balossi argues that there was a culturally autonomous «Dark-Faced Burnished Ware regional culture» in western Syria, understood as a regionally closed set of interactions that resulted in similar production and consumption of DFBW ceramics.[9] In a similar manner, Aurenche and Kozlowski argue for the existence of cultural frontiers in the Late Neolithic of northern Mesopotamia that separated three regionally distinct sets of interactions: *Zagros*, *Proto-Hassuna* and *Pre-Halaf*.[10] Of course, there was some overlap in material traits, but items that are found in the «wrong» group can be explained as «élements isolés», which perhaps resulted from trade or the «transfer» of ideas across boundaries.[11] The «empty» areas in between each of these reified entities have now become «frontiers» in need of explanation. These approaches recapitulate very similar earlier discussions on the geographical distributions of the Late Neolithic Hassuna and Samarra cultures. The present consensus is that these two entities were culturally, socio-economically and geographically distinct.

This particular conceptualization of human cultural expression has been criticized from both a theoretical and an empirical perspective. It offers a starkly normative view of human societies, in which actors are seen as passive replicators of cultural systems and structures.[12] It is likely to reify in a wholly artificial manner what was, in effect, a fluid cultural idiom, creating artificial constructs whose putative origins then need to be explained.[13] As Reinhard Bernbeck argues, even the simple practice of naming chronological periods may result in *post-hoc* entities that are unlikely to bear any relationship with cultural identities in the past.[14] Such entities have an inbuilt danger of becoming «real life» actors on the prehistoric stage. This danger is exemplified, for instance, in the various migration theories that were popular in the past to explain Halaf origins.[15]

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[9] F. Balossi-Restelli 2006, *The Development of «Cultural Regions» in the Neolithic of the Near East. The «Dark-Faced Burnished Ware Horizon»,* Oxford, Archaeopress, BAR International Series 1482.

[10] O. Aurenche and S.K. Kozlowski 1999, *La Naissance du Néolithique au Proche-Orient*, Paris, Editions Errance, O. Aurenche, S.K. Kozlowski and M. LeMière 2004, «La notion de frontière dans le protonéolithique et le néolithique du Proche-Orient», in: Aurenche O., LeMière M. and Sanlaville P. (eds.), *From the River to the Sea. The Palaeolithic and the Neolithic on the Euprates and in the Northern Levant*, Oxford, BAR International Series 1263: 355-366.

[11] O. Aurenche, S.K. Kozlowski and M. LeMiere 2004, «La notion de frontière dans le protonéolithique et le néolithique du Proche-Orient», in: Aurenche O., LeMière M. and Sanlaville P. (eds.), *From the River to the Sea. The Palaeolithic and the Neolithic on the Euprates and in the Northern Levant*, Oxford, BAR International Series 1263: 358.

[12] I. Hodder and S. Hudson 2003, *Reading the Past. Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press (third edition)Jones 1997.

[13] S. Campbell 1992, *Culture, Chronology and Change in the Later Neolithic of North Mesopotamia*, Edinburgh, Ph.D. thesis University of Edinburgh, S. Campbell 1999, «Archaeological constructs and past reality on the Upper Euphrates», in: del Olmo Lete G. and Montero Fenollos J. L. (eds.), *Archaeology of the Upper Syrian Euphrates: the Tishrin Dam Area*, Barcelona, University of Barcelona: 573-583.

[14] R. Bernbeck, this volume.

[15] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse 2007, *Plain and Painted Pottery. The Rise of Late Neolithic Ceramic Styles on the Syrian and Northern Mesopotamian Plains*, Turnhout, Brepols (Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities).

Is the Halaf culture really distinct from its neighbours and predecessors, in terms of what we archaeologists observe on the ground? Perhaps not surprising, most constituting elements of the «Halaf package» have now been shown to have spatio-temporal distributions that easily cross traditionally accepted culture-historical boundaries. Circular buildings (tholoi), for instance, are commonly found in Pre-Halaf and Transitional contexts.[16] At Tell Sabi Abyad they can now be traced back to the final stages of the Early Pottery Neolithic.[17] Stamp seals were no Halaf invention, but instead became popular among Late Neolithic communities during the Pre-Halaf stage.[18] As Marc Verhoeven argues, it is presently difficult, if not impossible, to find our pottery-based culture-historical entities reflected in changes in ritual practice.[19]

This leaves us with the pottery. After all, the Halaf culture was first named after a new, conspicuously distinct type of pottery.[20] At the very least, then, the Halafian ceramic tradition *is* unequivocally distinct from the Standard Hassuna, Pre-Halaf, Proto-Hassuna and Samarra traditions. Or is it not?

The Pre-Halaf to Halaf Transitional («Proto-Halaf») at Tell Sabi Abyad

At Tell Sabi Abyad the Proto-Halaf phase starts with the introduction of a small proportion of a wholly new kind of pottery: finely made, mineral-tempered Standard Fine Ware bearing a complex, intricate style of decoration.[21] The proportion of Fine Ware rose rapidly, until eventually it replaced most of the other categories (Fig. 2). Alongside this major shift in the composition of the ceramic assemblage, there were modifications in technology, vessel shape and decorative style. Gradually these led from the rough, relatively simple shapes and designs from the Pre-Halaf era to the intricately painted, complex shapes that are so

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[16] M. Verhoeven 1999, *An Ethnographical Ethnography of a Late Neolithic Community. Space, Place and Social Relations at Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria,* Istanbul, Nederlands Historisch Archeologisch Instituut, W. Cruells, this volume.

[17] P.M.M.G. Akkermans, pers. comm., February 2006.

[18] K. Duistermaat 1996, «The seals and sealings», in: Akkermans P.M.M.G. (ed.), *Tell Sabi Abyad. The Late Neolithic Settlement*, Istanbul, Nederlands Historisch Archeologisch Instituut: 339-401, K. Duistermaat 2000, «A view on Late Neolithic sealing practices in the Near East. The case of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria», in: Perna M. (ed.), *Administrative Documents in the Aegean and their Near Eastern Counterparts*, Proceedings of the International Colloquium Naples: 13-31, K. Duistermaat 2002, «Two clay sealings», in: Suleiman A. and Nieuwenhuyse O.P. (eds.), *Tell Boueid II. A Late Neolithic Village on the Middle Khabur (Syria)*, Turnhout, Brepols (*Subartu XI*): 149-152, P.M.M.G. Akkermans and K. Duistermaat 1997, «Of storage and nomads. The sealings of Late Neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria», *Paléorient* 22/2: 17-44, P.M.M.G. Akkermans and K. Duistermaat 2004, «More seals and sealings from Neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria», *Levant* 36: 1-11.

[19] M. Verhoeven, this volume.

[20] M.A.S. Von Oppenheim and H. Schmidt 1943, *Tell Halaf I: die prähistorische Funde*, Berlin, Walter de Gruyter.

[21] M. LeMière and O.P. Nieuwenhuyse 1996, «The Prehistoric Pottery», in: Akkermans P.M.M.G. (ed.), *Tell Sabi Abyad. The Late Neolithic Settlement,* Istanbul, Nederlands Historisch Archeologisch Instituut: 119-284, A. Van As, L. Jacobs and O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 1998, «The Transitional Fine Ware Pottery of Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria. A Pilot Study», *Newsletter of the Department of Pottery Technology* 14/15, Leiden, Leiden University Press: 25-47.

characteristic of the Halaf. What I wish to discuss briefly here is how these innovations relate to commonly accepted notions of Hassuna, Samarra and Halaf pottery and show why it is difficult to use these terms. Although Tell Sabi Abyad thus far offers the best context, it is important to emphasize that similar processes are observed at sites such as Tell Halula, Hakemi Use and Chagar Bazar.[22]

In terms of ceramic technology, the Standard Fine Ware during the Transitional stage (levels 7-4) is closely comparable to both Standard Hassuna and Samarra Fine Ware pottery. The differences between these cultural categories appear to be mainly stylistic (how vessels were decorated), and not technological (how they were made). We tested this by comparing the Standard Fine Ware from Tell Sabi Abyad with decorated Fine Ware from three other sites traditionally ascribed to different culture-historical entities: Tell Shemshara (Hassuna/Samarra), Tell Baghouz (Samarra) and Tell Boueid II (Transitional/Samarra).[23] Most briefly, the painted Fine Wares from these sites may be attributed to a single technological group. Notwithstanding some clear internal variation it is sufficiently distinct *vis-à-vis* other groups. This is certainly not to claim that the painted Fine Wares from these sites are identical. Small differences in the choice of clay or the application of pigments, however, are best understood as local applications of a broadly similar technological chain of operations for making this particular type of pottery.[24]

What technological elements did these Fine Wares have in common? Perhaps most basically, potters selected a finely mineral-textured, «sandy» clay that could be worked without much further processing. Transitional-period sherds often have a slightly «gritty» feel. Besides, the calcareous clays selected contained various salts that tended to bleach the surface to a light colour during drying and firing. Fine Ware vessels were rarely burnished, but instead had their surfaces carefully smoothed. This tended to further enhance the light surface colour, by bringing the finer particles and salts to the surface. In addition, the potters used paints based on forms of iron oxide.[25] They applied new firing techniques that resulted in a dark-coloured paint on a light surface background. Increased control of oxygen fluctuations during the firing separated these new Fine Wares from all other painted pottery groups from the Pre-Halaf and Transitional stages.[26]

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[22] See W. Cruells, this volume, H. Tekin, this volume. Readers will notice that at Tell Sabi Abyad during its Pre-Halaf to Early Halaf stages the pottery assemblage included several distinct ware categories. I shall concentrate exclusively on only one of them: Standard Fine Ware. This restriction leaves out much of the broader picture, as the other categories underwent significant modifications as well, and each constituent element should be properly understood in the context of all others.

[23] See B. Robert and colleagues, this volume, O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, L. Jacobs, A. Van As, T. Broekmans and M. Adriaens, 2001, «Making Samarra Fine Ware - technological observations on the ceramics from Tell Baghouz (Syria)», *Paléorient* 27/1: 147-165, O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, L. Jacobs and A. Van As, 2002, «The ceramics», in: Suleiman A. and Nieuwenhuyse O.P. (eds.), *Tell Boueid II. A Late NeolithicVillage on the Middle Khabur (Syria),* Turnhout, Brepols (*Subartu XI*): 35-124.

[24] Much of the Standard Fine Ware was no doubt produced locally at Tell Sabi Abyad, but it also appears to be the case that part of it was imported from elsewhere (LeMière and Picon, this volume).

[25] See B. Robert *et al.,* this volume.

[26] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse 2007, *Plain and Painted Pottery. The Rise of Late Neolithic Ceramic Styles on the Syrian and Northern Mesopotamian Plains*, Turnhout, Brepols (Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities).

Fine Ware technology did not remain static. At Tell Sabi Abyad, through time, there was a gradual, progressive trend towards the use of finer clays for pottery production. If in the earliest Transitional period levels (levels 7-6) clays were still «sandy», and even occasionally included vegetal inclusions, in later levels hardly any macroscopically visible inclusions remained, apart from small white lumps of calcium carbonate («lime»). This trend may have come about by selecting cleaner clays, or applying techniques for cleaning the clay such as levigation, or a combination of those. The result (in levels 3-1) was Fine Ware pottery made in a fine, compact clay that compares well with that of other Early Halaf sites (Fig. 3). Also, through time potters gained increasing control over pigments and techniques of firing. In contrast to Robert *et al.* (this volume), who suggest that the dark paints were the accidental by-product of poor firing control, I would argue that dark paints over a light background were precisely what Fine Ware potters strove to achieve. By Early Halaf times they had mastered considerable expertise enabling them to produce a remarkably uniform dark paint. Paints gradually became slightly glossy, too. Whereas matt paints are typical for both Standard Hassuna and Samarra Fine Ware, the somewhat glossy, dark paints are typical for Early Halaf painted pottery.

Alongside these innovations in ceramic technology, there were changes in pottery morphology. The basic shaping methods for making Halaf pottery appear to have been widely applied already during the Pre-Halaf stage, including pinching and coiling and the use of moulds for shaping the base. The changes in vessel shape, therefore, result from stylistic processes rather than from technological inventions. If we ignore subtle distinctions between types and look at broader morphological classes instead, the Pre-Halaf levels were mostly characterized by simple, convex-sided shapes and by vessels with straight walls. Through time, we can observe the gradual increase of S-shaped profiles and the rapid increase of vessels having a carinated profile - shapes that are very commonly found in Hassuna and Samarra assemblages (Fig. 4). The ultimate result was the development of various types of carinated, collared vessels, of which the Early Halaf «small cream bowl» is just one example.[27]

Finally, there were changes in decorative style. What we term «Transitional period» appears to have been a stage during which the proportion of decorated ceramics increased sharply (from about 20% in the Pre-Halaf to about 80% in the Early Halaf). Alongside this development, most of the earlier, Pre-Halaf decorative techniques went out of fashion, to be replaced by a single technique: painting with dark paint. One possible reason why painting was preferred may have been that it was more versatile and enabled the creation of more complex design structures and motifs. And this is exactly what happened. Design «complexity» is defined here as the total division of the empty vessel surface with structural dividers: horizontal and vertical lines that define fields to be filled with motifs. Through time, potters increasingly subdivided the vessel surface in increasingly smaller horizontal design fields. In addition, they developed more complex ways of separating fields, for instance by adding free lines between fields. At the same time, the range of design motifs available to them expanded rapidly.[28]

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[27] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 2007, op. cit.

[28] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse 2007, op. cit.

Design structure and motifs are of course a major element in defining prehistoric painted pottery styles in the Near East. Whereas Standard Hassuna pottery is generally thought to be characterized by simple design structures, the most complex design structures are generally attributed to Classic Samarra Fine Ware pottery. I would argue that as far as our culture-historical terminology is concerned, the more complex design structures that arose at the end of the Transitional period at Tell Sabi Abyad and other Proto-Halaf sites in northern Syria resemble what in other contexts we would easily see as «Classic Samarra» (but see Bernbeck 1994, this volume, for a strongly critical view). Typical «Samarra» design motifs include stepped patterns and «dancing ladies». This is certainly not to say that all Standard Fine Ware pottery should be labelled «Samarran» (indeed, most painted Standard Fine Ware would *not* fall within this definition) or even that Tell Sabi Abyad was a «Samarra» site. Rather, I argue that at Tell Sabi Abyad and other Proto-Halaf sites more complex design structures arose within a diachronic continuum of stylistic change. Following the Transitional period, Fine-Ware potters at Tell Sabi Abyad returned to simpler design structures, again emphasizing broad, singular design fields, but filled them with more complex motifs (Fig. 5). One possible reason for this shift may have been that at the end of the Transitional period it may have been difficult to subdivide the vessel surface further into smaller design zones.[29]

To summarize this oversimplified review, the picture at Tell Sabi Abyad suggests that what is termed Transitional/Proto-Halaf was characterized by continuous innovation in ceramic technology, morphology and decorative style. What triggered these innovations?

Pots in context

As far as we can presently reconstruct, these ceramic innovations did not occur in a vacuum. Starting from around 6300 cal. BC, just prior to the Transitional period, Late Neolithic communities in the Balikh valley experienced a series of far-reaching socio-economic changes. There seem to have been transformations in the settlement pattern, leading to a characteristic «Halaf»-like pattern of mainly short-lived, small sites surrounding the occasional larger, long-lived settlement of which Tell Sabi Abyad itself was an example.[30] There were changes in the ideological realm, as for instance seen in the adoption of new types of figurines[31] and the widespread use of stamp seals and clay tokens as the expression of new concepts of ownership and property rights.[32] Changes in the faunal assemblage and the introduction of spindle whorls suggest that ovicaprids were increasingly kept for their wool.[33] There may also have been

[29] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse 2007, op. cit.

[30] P.M.M.G. Akkermans, 1993, op. cit., P.M.M.G. Akkermans and G. Schwartz, 2003, op. cit.

[31] P.M.M.G. Akkermans and G. Schwartz, 2003, op. cit.: 142-143.

[32] P.M.M.G. Akkermans and K. Duistermaat, 1997, op. cit.

[33] P.M.M.G. Akkermans *et al.*, 2006, op. cit., C. Cavallo 2000, *Animals in the Steppe. A zooarchaeological analysis of Later Neolithic Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria*, Oxford, BAR International Series 891.

changes in foodstuffs or cuisine associated with what we term the Transition to the Halaf: a study of residue traces has yielded evidence of milk on a number of sherds from the Pre-Halaf and Transitional periods.[34] Among the coarse Standard Ware, new vessel shapes were introduced that may have been related to the processing of dairy products, such as funnels and sieves.[35]

The modifications that we see in the ceramics formed part of these wider changes. At the end of the sixth millennium BC pottery seems to have gained new roles, as the expression of status and prestige and as a marker of social identity. Significantly, for the first time vessels were occasionally repaired when they broke. Repairs, moreover, are found exclusively with the decorated Fine Wares, not with any of the other pottery groups. Vessels also began to be part of burial practices as gifts for the deceased. As I have argued elsewhere, competition between Late Neolithic groups may have been an important factor driving ceramic change and innovation.[36] Specifically, the concept of *emulation* may explain much of the ceramic change observed. In its most general sense, emulation in material consumption and production may arise in competitive situations in which social boundaries are permeable, and where artefacts serve to express a relative social status of some sort.[37] Stylistically or technologically innovative items begin as rare novelties, then quickly become common goods. Rapid material culture change and progressive innovation are typical results of emulation processes.

Within the Syrian Late Neolithic much of this competition may have been played out during feasting. If broad functional categories are applied to the Transitional period and Early Halaf ceramics, it appears that through time the functional category of vessels suitable for serving and consuming food and, in particular, drink increases (Fig. 6). The archetypal Hassuna/Samarra/Halaf vessel is a *drinking* vessel. Furthermore, it appears that many of the technological, morphological and stylistic innovations observed seem to start in the group of vessels suitable for serving and consumption, spreading afterwards to other functional categories. The earliest Standard Fine Ware mostly consisted of serving vessels; only later did this new technology and style incorporate other functional categories as well. The increasing morphological and decorative complexity is strongly associated with this functional category. Feasts would have offered a forum for rivalling groups to compete with gift-giving and conspicuous consumption, while at the same time providing them

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[34] M.S. Copley M.S., R. Berstan, S.N. Dudd, G. Dogherty, A.J. Mukherjee, V. Straker, S. Payne and R.P. Evershed, 2003, «Direct chemical evidence for widespread dairying in prehistoric Britain», *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 100 no. 4: 1524-1529.

[35] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 2007, op. cit. However, the actual number of such finds is extremely low: at Tell Sabi Abyad only one funel and two sieves were found.

[36] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 2007, op. cit.

[37] M. Dietler, 1990, «Driven by drink: the role of drinking in the political economy and the case of early Iron Age France», *Journal of Anthropological Archaeology* 9: 352-406, D. Miller, 1982, «Structures and strategies: an aspect of the relationship between social hierarchy and cultural change», in: Hodder I. (ed.), *Symbolic and Structural Archaeology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 89-98, D. Miller, 1985, *Artefacts as Categories. A Study of Ceramic Variability in Central India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press , J. Thomas, 1991, *Rethinking the Neolithic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

with the possibility to manipulate relations of debt and cement alliances with partners from other groups.[38] Feasting, of course, did not start in the later sixth millennium. It may be argued that the manifold changes we observe in the ceramics reflect a transformation in the *role* of feasting, its nature and scale, and above all, notions on how such events ought to be dressed up. Significantly, scenes of, presumably, dancing figures now begin to appear on the painted Fine Ware ceramics (Fig. 7).[39]

What culture? Some concluding remarks

Following traditionally accepted culture-historical nomenclature, it might be possible to argue that the ceramic assemblage at Tell Sabi Abyad passed from a «Pre-Halaf» stage through a «Hassuna-Samarra» stage into an «Early Halaf» stage. However, to the degree that such terms imply rupture and socio-cultural distinctiveness, they become meaningless when ceramic innovation is placed in a long-term perspective and in a wider cultural context. Rather, at Tell Sabi Abyad there appears to have been a continuum of ceramic innovation and change starting at ca. 6200 cal. BC. Within this continuum, to be sure, we archaeologists can construct chronological divisions on the basis of pottery style. The term «Proto-Halaf» was coined from such a perspective.[40] There never was such a thing as a Proto-Halaf «culture»; the term refers exclusively to changes in pottery style observed at a number of Late Neolithic sites in northern Syria, southeastern Anatolia and northern Iraq.[41] If this restriction is kept sufficiently clear, the term may serve as a valuable addition to the Mesopotamian terminological jungle.

Bernbeck (this volume) advocates that we restrict the naming of periods as much as possible to small sections of time and space. In practice, this is already happening. Stupefied by the difficulties of applying supra-regional terminologies to local sequences of change, an increasing number of archaeologists have begun building regional chronologies. Certainly, these still use local type sites to stand for wider variation at the regional level - Tell Sabi Abyad for the Balikh, Halula for the Syrian Euphrates, Chagar Bazar for the Khabur - but they are an important step away from the traditional, over-generalizing pan-Mesopotamian schemes. What was termed Proto-Halaf occurs in all of these areas (*Balikh IIIA*, *Halula IV*, *CBI*, respectively[42]), but regional terminologies are crucial for us to begin gaining an insight into local peculiarities.

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[38] M. Dietler and B. Hayden, eds., 2001, *Feasts. Archaeological and Ethnographic Perspectives on Food, Politics and Power*, Washington, Smithsonian, P. Halstead and J.C. Barrett, eds., 2004, *Food, Cuisine and Society in Prehistoric Greece*, Oxford, Oxbow (Sheffield Studies in Aegean Archaeology 5).

[39] Y. Garfinkel, 1998, «Dancing and the beginning of art scenes in the early village communities of the Near East and Southeast Europe», *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 8/2: 207-237, Y. Garfinkel, 2003, *Dancing at the Dawn of Agriculture*, Austin, Texas University.

[40] W. Cruells and O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 2004, «The Proto-Halaf period in Syria. New sites, new data», *Paléorient* 30/1: 47-68.

[41] W. Cruells, this volume.

[42] W. Cruells, this volume.

On the other hand, too strong a focus on the small scale may ignore wider spatial trends, without which the small-scale events make very little sense indeed. It is these larger trends that the term Proto-Halaf tried to capture. Regional Late Neolithic communities will of course not have perceived the supra-regional trends that we the archaeologists construct. These communities will not have thought of themselves as being «Halaf» (replace at will with Hassuna, Samarra, Pre-Halaf), or on their way to becoming Halaf («Proto-Halaf»). On the other hand, there is much in the archaeology of the Late Neolithic that points to a lively, quite deliberate participation of small local groups in larger social institutions. There are the non-local goods at Late Neolithic sites, such as precious stone, exotic shell, raw copper, obsidian, bitumen or, indeed, non-local pottery. In terms of the ceramics, what is striking is the apparent speed at which innovations occured over considerable distances. Even if we allow for generous margins due to poor absolute dating and accept the possibility that similar-looking styles followed different trajectories in different areas, there seems to be no denying that local groups actively involved themselves in the larger world they found themselves in. People will have been aware of broader spatio-temporal trends and boundaries that shaped their lives, even if they almost certainly had an entirely different conception of how these were constituted than we have. Indeed, the «international» aspect of Late Neolithic pottery styles from ca. 6200 cal. BC onwards may have been at the heart of what they meant in social and symbolic terms.[43]

The current classificatory difficulties also arise from the history of our research field, which presses us to translate new discoveries at Proto-Halaf sites into the traditional Mesopotamian vocabulary. Even careful designations such as «Samarra-related», «Northern Samarra», «Hassuna-influenced» or, indeed, «Proto-Halaf» imply pre-existing culture-historical entities. It is crucial that ceramic assemblages from Proto-Halaf sites are studied in their own right and in detail, after which archaeologists may search for comparisons and contrasts with existing categories. It is likely that this will contribute to a deconstructing of these traditional entities. Today scholars increasingly become aware of biases in sampling procedures and prejudices in selecting material for publication at many key sites excavated in the past, sites that still form the backbone of our current typo-chronological framework.

I here argue that the so-called Standard Fine Ware from the Proto-Halaf sites belongs to the same broad category that also includes groups traditionally known as Standard Hassuna and Samarra Fine Ware. To be sure, there are differences in decorative technology and style. For instance, incised designs are found with Standard Hassuna ceramics in northern Iraq and southeastern Anatolia, a combination that so far appears to be entirely absent from northern Syria.[44] Within the painted canon, notwithstanding the broad similarities over large regions, local expressions can certainly be pointed out.[45] Considering the large geographic space involved,

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[43] S. Campbell, 1992, op. cit., O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 2007, op. cit.

[44] R.V. Gut, 1995, *Das prähistorische Ninive. Zur relativen Chronologie der frühen Perioden Nordmesopotamiens*, Mainz, Phillip von Zabern.

[45] R. Bernbeck, 1994, op. cit., R. Bernbeck, this volume.

local interpretations are probably just what we should expect. In the past, such local expressions were usually overlooked in favour of over-emphasizing homogeneity. But contrary to what still appears to be a general consensus today, to me this variation presently does *not* suggest clear regional boundaries in terms of ceramics during the Proto-Halaf period. For instance, it can be demonstrated that the assemblage from the Samarra type site Tell Baghouz is actually *intermediate* between the «classic Samarra» and the «northern Samarra» sites.[46]

A valuable contribution ceramic specialists may make in this respect, is to deconstruct culture-historical entities simply by taking them apart.[47] For instance, we may look at the separate distributions of Standard Fine Ware, Orange Fine Ware, and Dark-Faced Burnished Ware, and explore their social, economic and symbolic meanings. Plotting the spreads of these three key-elements of many Late Neolithic cultural entities yields a diffuse pattern of overlapping distributions with, at best, fuzzy boundaries (Fig. 8). What this simple example shows is that pottery groups in the Late Neolithic had overlapping but not identical distributions, suggesting that they figured in different networks of exchange of goods, ideas and people. In this example I took Tell Sabi Abyad as the entirely arbitrary focal point, but similar figures using other focal points are likely to result in similar fuzzy-edged pictures. Specialists may discuss the role of Dark-Faced Burnished Ware or Standard Fine Ware within Late Neolithic societies, while avoiding much problematic culture-historical terminology. In this specific example, whereas Dark-Faced Burnished Ware may have constituted a specialized cooking ware, painted Fine Wares may have been important for their role in some sort of competitive feasting.[48]

It is often heard that in spite of the inherent weaknesses of the existing terminology we can hardly afford to do without. We need to have some terms and, after all, we all know what we talk about, don't we? What alternatives do we have? One useful alternative to the notion of polythetic cultures may be the metaphor of a social field.[49] As used among anthropologists, a social field may be understood as a field of interactions and social influences, both intended and unintended, whether perceived by other parties or not.[50] Within this field, activities in one local segment affect possibilities in others, whether the individual participants are aware of each other's existence or not. Participants find themselves affected by social events that extend far beyond their immediate kin. Social fields in pre-state societies often cover large swatches of geographic space, and exist despite, or independently from, boundaries in language or subsistence strategies.

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[46] O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, 1999, «Tell Baghouz reconsidered: a collection of "Classic" Samarra sherds from the Louvre», *Syria* 76: 1-18.

[47] following an early suggestion by I. Hodder, 1978, «Simple corelations between material culture and society: a review», in: Hodder I. (ed.), *The Spatial Organisation of Culture*, London, Duckworth: 3-24.

[48] M. LeMière and M. Picon, 1999, «Les débuts de la céramique au Proche Orient», *Paléorient* 24/2: 5-26.

[49] R. Layton, 1997, *An Introduction to Theory in Anthropology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press: 38-39, R.L. Welsch and J.E. Terrell, 1998, «Material culture, social fields and social boundaries on the Sepik Coast of New Guinea», in: Stark M.T. (ed.), *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries*, Washington, Smithsonian Institution: 50 - 78, E.R. Wolf, 1982, *Europe and the People without History*, Berkely, University of California Press.

[50] R.L. Welsch and J.E. Terrell 1998, op. cit.: 52.

Importantly, social fields are not normative. Participants certainly follow «rules», expectations and agreed-upon principles about how people ought to behave, but there is plenty of room for actively manipulating one's own participation and that of others.[51] Welsch and Terrell[52] show how on the Sepik coast of New Guinea competitive manipulation was part of such rules, along with prescribed notions of generosity and friendship. Here, various goods and ideas travelled in different directions along pathways in multiple social fields, depending on the local context and the individual participants' decisions. Social identities were to a large extent situational and contextually constituted; correspondingly, the material expression of identity was itself multiple. In terms of Late Neolithic pottery technologies and decorative styles in the Near East, then, different technologies and styles may have held different meanings and may have figured in different social contexts. Looking at the aggregate from a huge distance, we archaeologists can often perceive a «communality of culture», but there is no *a priori* reason to assume that social fields must result in clear regional boundaries. The possibility of discrete regional boundaries that persisted over time in the Late Neolithic, expressed in pottery style, is certainly not excluded, but if such boundaries («frontiers») can in fact be demonstrated they seem to have constituted an anomaly.

Pottery styles in the late sixth millennium BC gained new, more overtly symbolic roles. The introduction and subsequent development of intricately painted Fine Wares point to the development of new patterns of ceramic consumption that connected regional communities living far apart. The practices that this pottery represent may have represented something novel at the time, but they were there to stay. For almost a millennium, people would express their identities by making and using magnificently painted serving vessels.

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[51] F. Barth, 1967, «On the study of social change», *American Anthropologist* 69: 661-669.

[52] L.R. Welsch and J.E. Terrell, 1998, op. cit.: 55-68.[23] See B. Robert and colleagues, this volume, O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, L. Jacobs, A. Van As, T. Broekmans and M. Adriaens, 2001, «Making Samarra Fine Ware - technological observations on the ceramics from Tell Baghouz (Syria)», *Paléorient* 27/1: 147-165, O.P. Nieuwenhuyse, L. Jacobs and A. Van As, 2002, «The ceramics», in: Suleiman A. and Nieuwenhuyse O.P. (eds.), *Tell Boueid II. A Late NeolithicVillage on the Middle Khabur (Syria),* Turnhout, Brepols (*Subartu XI*): 35-124.

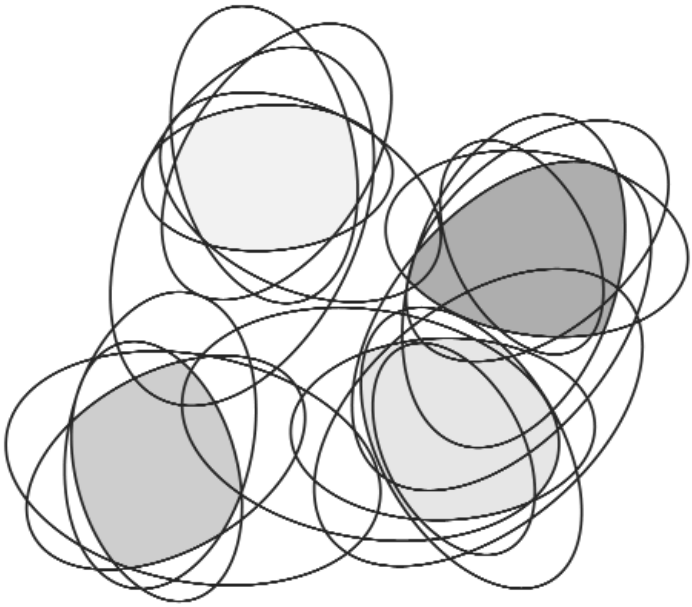

Fig. 1: The polythetic culture model, showing the boundaries of four hypothetical cultures A, B, C, and D within a larger culture group (after Clarke 1968 [1978]: fig. 72).

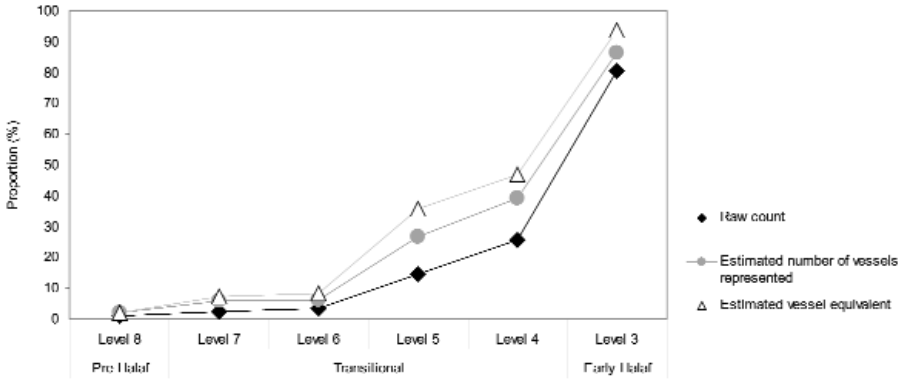

Fig. 2: The rising proportion of Fine Ware pottery during the Transitional stage («Proto-Halaf») at Tell Sabi Abyad (levels 7-4).

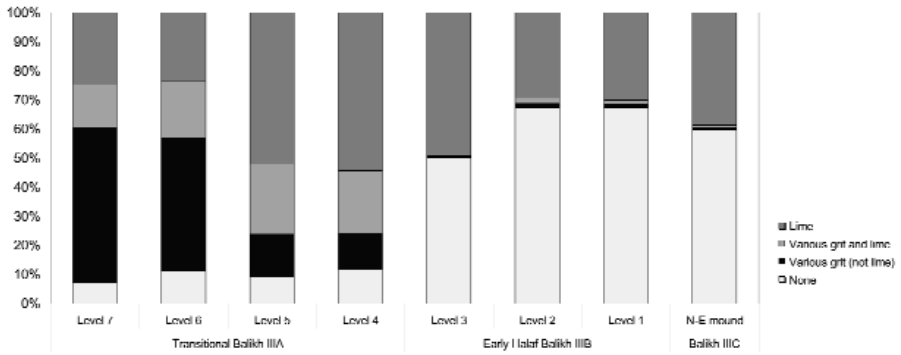

Fig. 3: Changes in clay selection and fabric preparation leading to finer fabrics at Tell Sabi Abyad during the Transitional (levels 7-4) and Early Halaf (levels 3-1) periods.

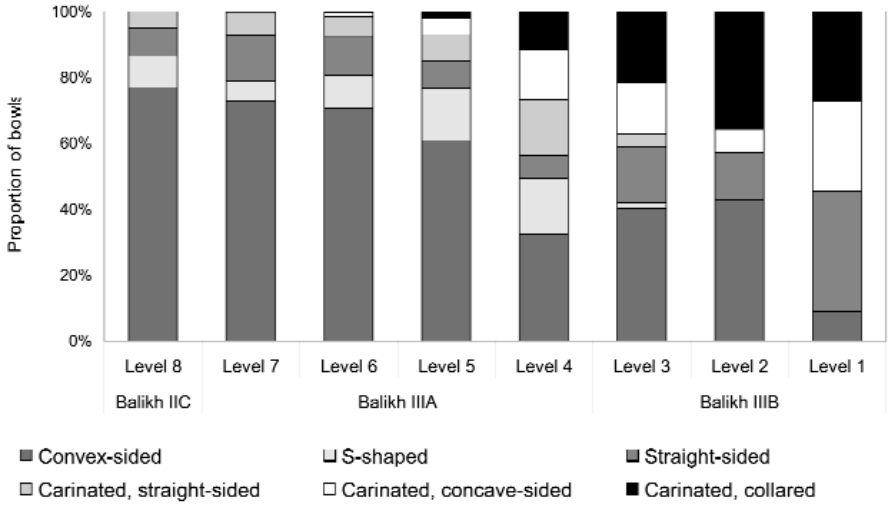

Fig. 4: Changes in vessel shape leading to increased morphological complexity at Tell Sabi Abyad during the Transitional (levels 7-4) and Early Halaf (levels 3-1) periods.

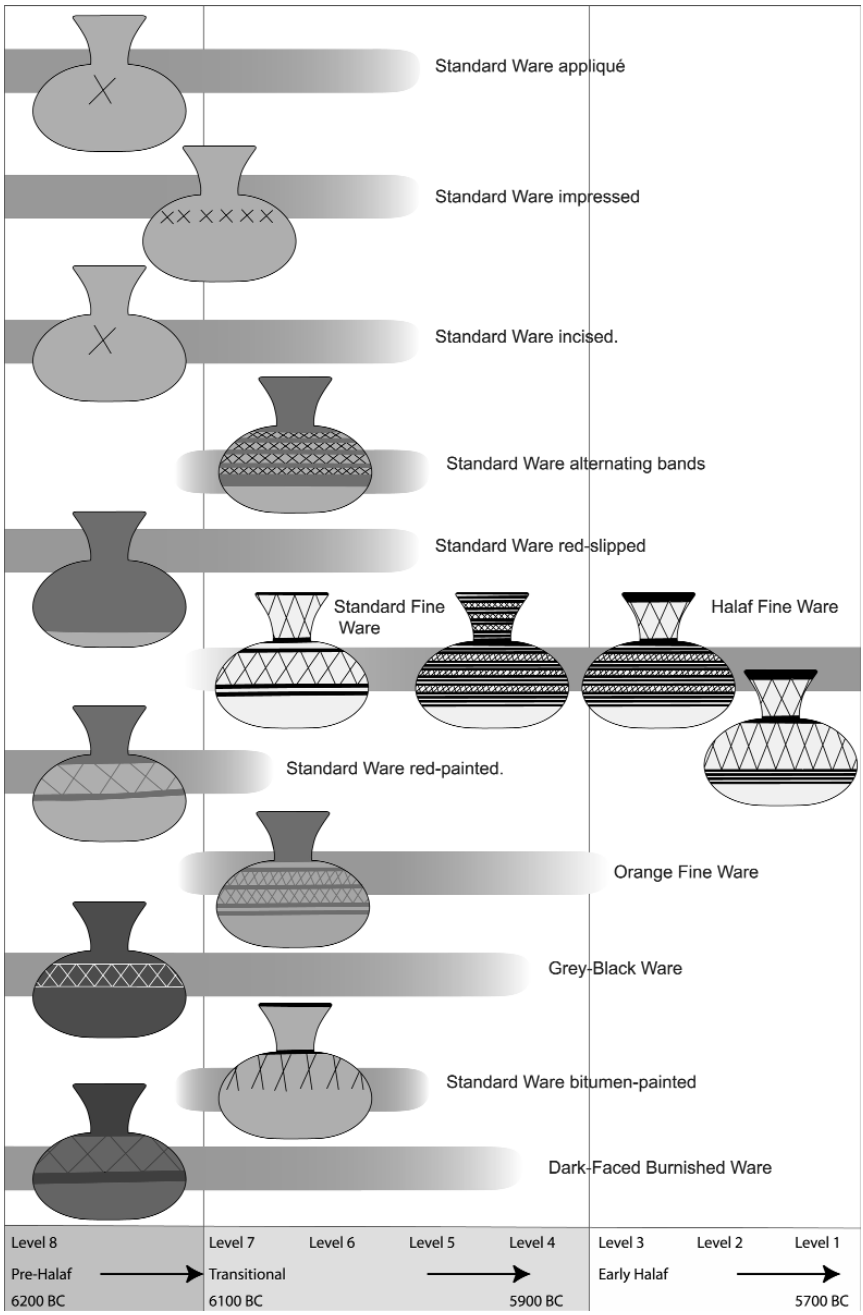

Fig. 5: Changes in decorative style leading to increased design structure complexity at Tell Sabi Abyad during the Transitional (levels 7-4) and Early Halaf (levels 3-1) periods.

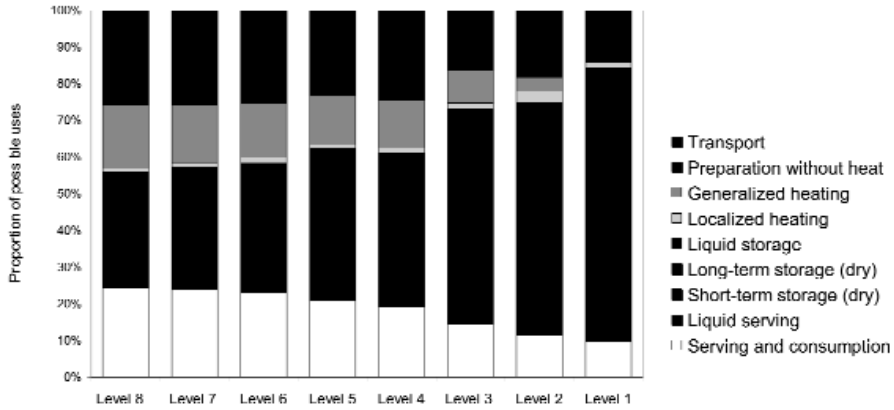

Fig. 6: Changes in ceramic consumption at Tell Sabi Abyad during the Transitional (levels 7-4) and Early Halaf (levels 3-1) periods.

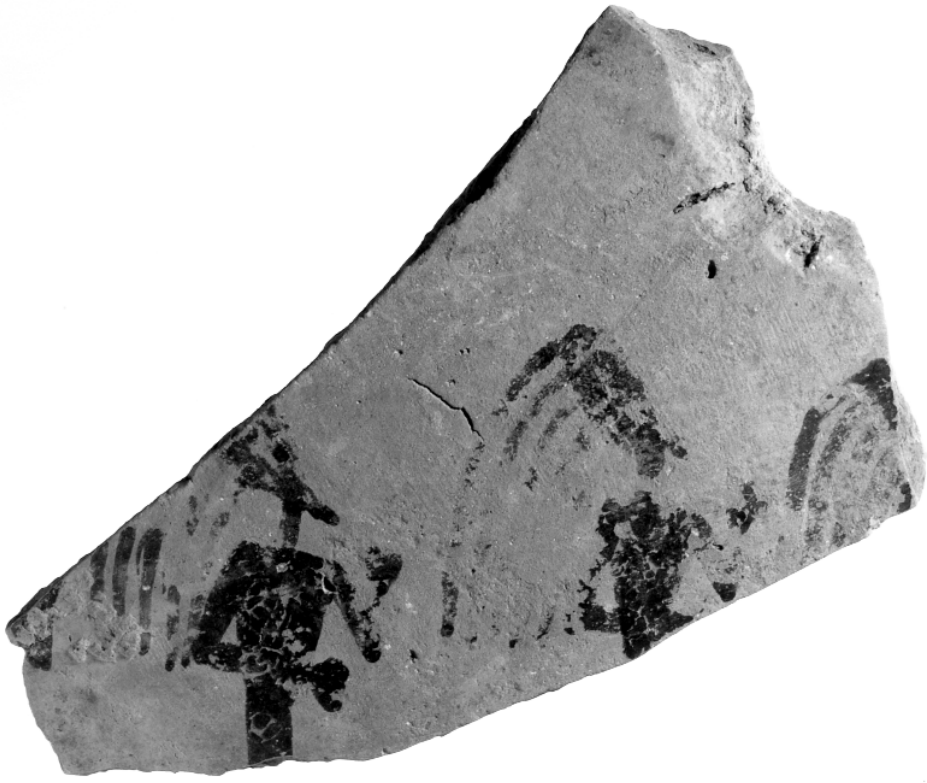

Fig. 7: Figures of (presumably) dancing figures painted on Early Halaf Fine Ware vessels fom Tell Sabi Abyad.

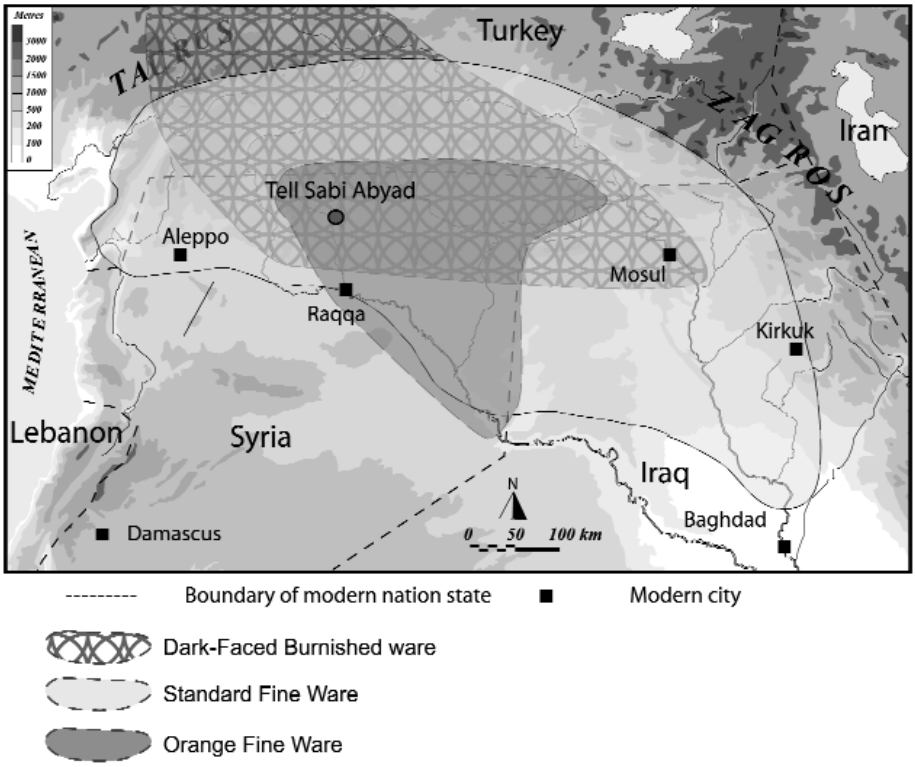

Fig. 8: Overlapping distributions of some of the major ceramic groups attested during the so-called Proto-Halaf period.