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BETWEEN THE CULTURES

THE CENTRAL TIGRIS REGION FROM THE 3RD TO THE 1ST MILLENNIUM BC

SOME REMARKS ON 'OLD BABYLONIAN' POTTERY

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This article is based on my attempt to get an overview of what is called 'Old Babylonian' pottery in the eastern central Tigris region, with special reference to the Diyala and Hamrin area, and is part of the preliminary work for my future analysis of Old Babylonian pottery from Tall Harmal / Saduppûm. So I am not yet going to present any new material but I would like to have a critical look at the research history. As a starting point I chose at least four of the comprehensive studies I found that represent some kind of typo-chronologies based on pottery which are Delougaz 1952, Ayoub 1982, Yaseen 1995 and Gasche *et al.* 1998 with the latest but strongly connected progress report by Armstrong 2008. I tried to compare these studies from the last five decades and soon discovered some differences in method and problems of terminology. So, if we want to use these studies as a basic reference for our own pottery researches we should be aware of them.

The first and most striking point is the use of the term 'Old Babylonian' itself: Sometimes it is meant in a historical sense to describe just the period of predominance of the First Dynasty of Babylon (1792–1595 BC) in Southern Babylonia beginning with the reign of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BC). This is the meaning I prefer and the reason why I have set quotation marks in my title. But sometimes it is used in a less specific way just as a generic term for a more or less homogeneous cultural epoch including the earlier Isin-Larsa time (2000–1800 BC). Here I would suggest to speak of the Middle Bronze Age in general. Delougaz and Ayoub differentiated between Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian period whereas the former even divided Isin-Larsa into an Early as well as a Late Larsa subphase and dated its transition by the reign of Ibâl-pî-El I from Eshnunna (first half of the 19th century BC).¹ Yaseen admitted that his study was only representative for the Isin-Larsa-Period though it is called "Old Babylonian pottery from the Hamrin". Findings from this later phase were missing, what he assumed to be characteristic of the Hamrin Basin. At least he was able to equate his Early Isin-Larsa with Delougaz' Early Larsa phase and his Middle/Late Isin-Larsa with Delougaz' Late Larsa phase.²

¹ Delougaz 1952, 114: "However, in the date column of the catalogue of forms only two phases of the period are distinguished— 'Early Larsa', from the beginning of the period through the reign of Ibâlpîel I, and 'Late Larsa', from the reign of Ibâlpîel I to the end of the Larsa dynasty, which extended according to Jacobsen into the latter part of Hammurabi's reign and thus coincided with about 130 years of the first dynasty of Babylon." *Ibid.*, 122f.: "By this name [Old Babylonian Period] we refer to the period after about the thirtieth year of Hammurabi's reign, when Babylon was gaining supremacy in southern Mesopotamia. Thus, as previously mentioned, the earlier part of the first dynasty of Babylon coincides with what we have termed 'Late Larsa'."

² Yaseen 1995, 1: At Tell Halawa "Level VI [correctly: IV] was dated by the Expedition to a time-span extending from the Ur III period into the Early Isin-Larsa phase of the Old Babylonian period, Level III to the Early Isin-Larsa phase and Level II to the Middle-Late Isin-Larsa (Early Isin-Larsa and Middle-Late Isin-Larsa here corresponding to the chronological terms 'Early Larsa' and 'Late Larsa' as employed by the the University of Chicago Expedition to the Diyala region in the 1930's). In common

Gasche *et al.* and Armstrong concentrated on the historical Old Babylonian period which they divided into an earlier phase represented by the reigns of Hammurabi and his son and successor Samsuiluna and a later phase including the time span until the end of the dynasty marked by the fall of Babylon caused by the Hittite conquerors.³ The Isin-Larsa period was not considered at all because Gasche and his colleagues were interested in the development of Kassite pottery out of Old Babylonian types and not in the characteristics of the latter's predecessors.⁴

This leads us to a second 'chronological' problem: The different studies were focused on larger time spans of which the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian period made up only a part – in fact, Yaseen is the only one who concentrated on what he called Old Babylonian period (as we have seen above actually meaning Isin-Larsa). The temporal extension allowed to focus on different aspects of development as did Gasche and his colleagues working on the Old Babylonian period with regard to the following Kassite period.⁵

Ayoub considered both as well as the earlier Ur III period to show changes within the Middle Bronze Age.⁶ The most comprehensive study is the one by Delougaz who gives an overall view of the pottery from chalcolithic Ubaid times until the Old Babylonian period.⁷

In these cases where more than one period is considered, it becomes difficult to realize which pottery forms and elements were typical for what period due to the fact that their definition is mixed up and set into relation with types from older and younger times. Especially in Ayoub's study the type definitions and their dating were given but a summary of what was characteristic for which period is missing. On the other hand the observation of typological developments allows to state whether there was continuity or discontinuity in the material culture from one period into the following – and sometimes it can be stated that there is no possible differentiation between their pottery ensembles. According to Ayoub the latter applied to the relation

with other sites with Old Babylonian period remains in the Hamrin Basin, little if anything was identifiable as belonging to the final, First Dynasty of Babylon phase of the Old Babylonian period extending from the creation by Hammurabi of the empire of the First Dynasty of Babylon towards the end of his reign down to the fall of the Dynasty in the reign of Samsuditana."

³ Gasche *et al.* 1998, 15: "Operation A, Phases Ie, Ic, and Ia [at Tell ed-Dēr] supply the basic stratigraphic framework for northern Babylonia during the Early Old Babylonian Period, that is, approximately the time of Hammurabi and Samsuiluna. (...) Operation E Ensembles V-III and Operation F Ensemble I provide the framework for the Late Old Babylonian Period, the final century of the First dynasty of Babylon."

⁴ *Ibid.*, 26: "Our purpose in this section is to identify and describe vessels that can be attributed to the Early Kassite Period, that is, the period extending from the time of the fall of the Old Babylonian Kingdom to the well-attested Late Kassite Period (...)."

⁵ *Ibid.*, 35: "By comparing the ceramic assemblages (...) with one another and with the Late Old Babylonian and the Late Kassite assemblages, we can arrange the vessels and their contexts in relative chronological order."

⁶ Ayoub 1982, 35: "Wir beschäftigen uns an dieser Stelle mit der Entwicklung der Keramik ab der Ur-III-Zeit bis zum Ende der kassitischen Ära. Während dieser Periode entfaltet sich ein großer Reichtum an Typen, die wir im folgenden einzeln herausarbeiten, bzw. deren Verzahnung in der Entwicklung über mehrere Perioden aufzeigen möchten."

⁷ Delougaz 1952, 125: "Owing to the considerable bulk of our pottery and the fact that it represents a long range of time, it seemed best to separate the comparative and interpretative part of this volume from the documentary. The diversity of our material precludes a uniform character of interpretation."

between Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian period where he found more similarities and continuities than distinctions in the type range.⁸

At first sight and apart from these two problematic aspects of chronology it would seem to make sense to compare Yaseen's conclusions for the Isin-Larsa period with those of Delougaz and Ayoub, and to complete their results for Old Babylonian pottery with those of Gasche and his colleagues. But there is a third problem in this attempt: the differences between the researched areas.

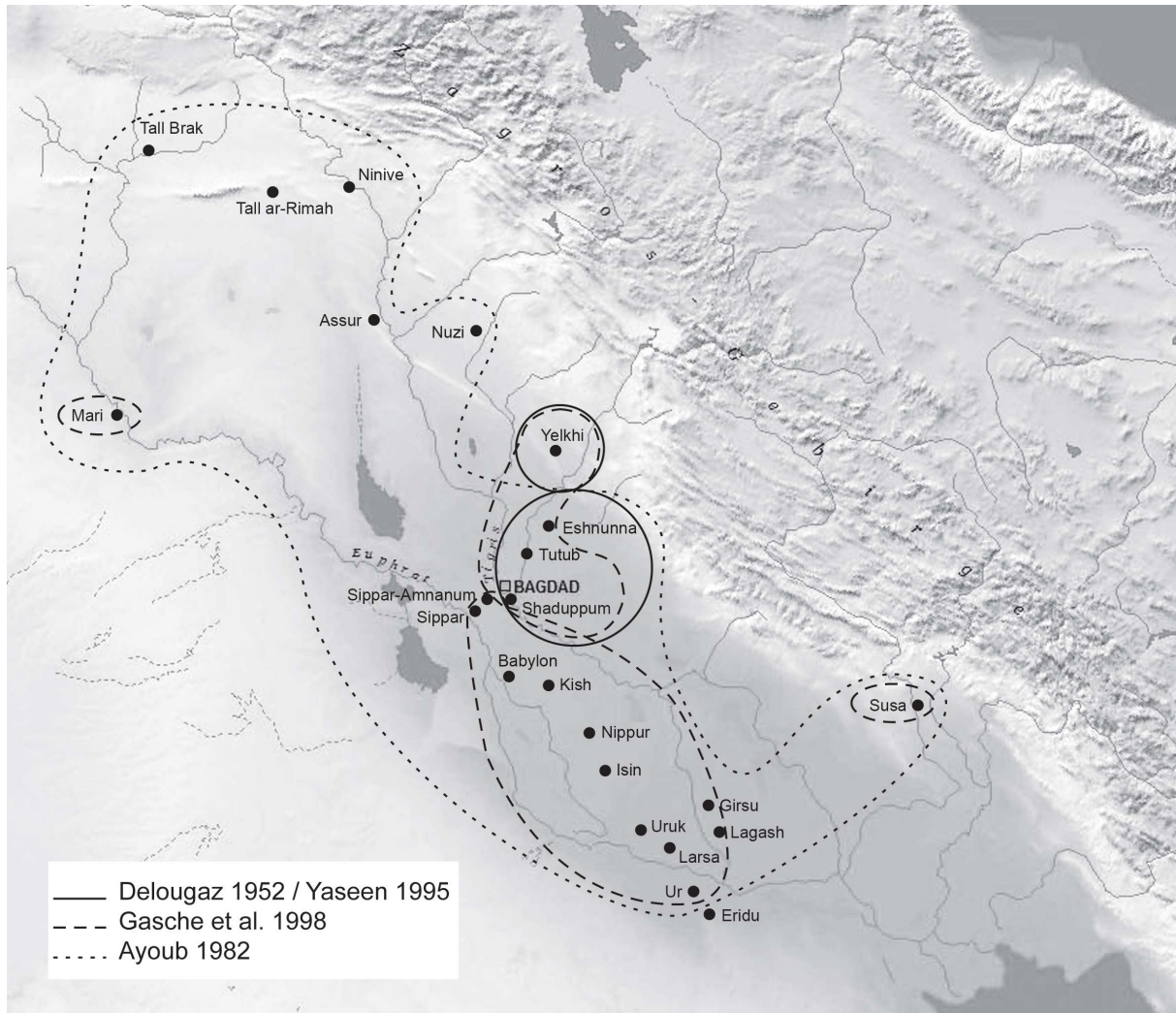


Fig. 3. Areas of research.

All authors referred to the eastern central Tigris region in some way, but only Delougaz really specialized in the Diyala region as well as Yaseen who confined exclusively to the Hamrin Basin. Gasche, Armstrong and their colleagues were interested in the development of Babylonia in the alluvial plain. They paid attention to the Diyala and Hamrin Region and even to the Middle Euphrates and Susa, but just as far as their relation to the heartland was concerned; in fact, they described them as 'peripheral' areas (Gasche *et al.* 1998, 20).

Ayoub investigated sites with continuous stratigraphic sequences from the Ur III to the Old Babylonian Period from all over Mesopotamia. There is no distinction

⁸ Ayoub 1982, 34: "In der Ur-III-Zeit ist eine starke Anlehnung an die vorhergehenden Perioden spürbar. Das lässt sich auch für das Verhältnis von altbabylonischer zur Isin-Larsa-Zeit feststellen."

between different regions and their inner development at all. A comparison of the different studies has therefore to be handled with much circumspection.

The comparison is also complicated by the differences in terminology and method used by the authors. On the one hand there exist descriptive names based on the suggested function of a special kind of vessel, on the other hand a type is just defined by its geometric form – but most common is an individual mixture of both systems.

Yaseen for example subdivided the pottery into descriptive categories, such as beaker i.e. drinking vessel, into types based on the vessel form, and into subtypes according to the form of the base (Yaseen 1995, 41f.).

Delougaz gave the most elaborated definition by distinguishing six main characteristics: general form and shape variants, proportion, type of base, type of rim, neck and shoulder, other accessories like handles, lugs, spouts or beaks. Each characteristic assigned to a defining digit so that every vessel was named by a six-digit number representing one type. Other aspects considered were size, surface finishing (including decoration), origin and date (Delougaz 1952, 2-22). This system has the advantage of being somehow objective but for its complexity it seems to me impracticable in the field work. In the end even Delougaz was forced to use descriptive terms when summarizing his results, because no reader could imagine a pot just by looking at a number.

The problem of these descriptions when individually applied by each author becomes obvious especially in the examples of what is called drinking cup (Delougaz)/cup (Gasche and colleagues)/beaker (Yaseen)/Becher (Ayoub) and the kind of goblet (Gasche and colleagues)/jar (Yaseen)/bottle (Delougaz)/Flasche (Ayoub). These terms do refer to two groups of vessels that are quite similar within themselves but also morphologically related to each other and it depends on the author to which group he assigns which piece of pottery and whether he describes it as beaker, cup or goblet.

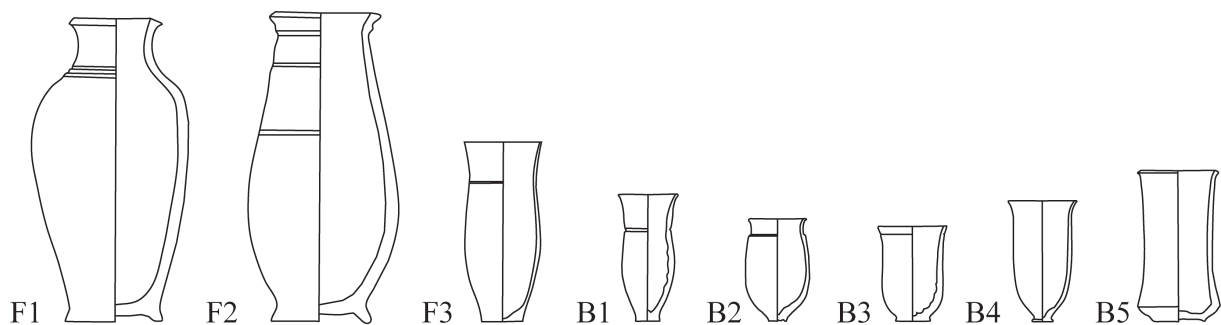


Fig. 4. Several types of 'bottles' F and 'beakers' B (scale 1:10; redrawn after: Ayoub 1982, 86 type 1a Fig. 2 [F3]; 101 type 40 Fig. 1 [B1]; Delougaz 1952, Pl. 152 [B2]; 153 [B3, B4, B5]; Yaseen 1995, Pl. 90, 224 [F1]. 226 [F2]).

Ayoub is the only one who gave a definition of what is meant by the descriptive names he used:

Vessels with a height larger than its diameters were either bottles (Flaschen) when their mouth was narrow or beakers (Becher) when their mouth was wide. Vessels with a height smaller than its diameters were either bowls (Schüsseln) when their rim was high or plates (Teller) when they were flat. If height and diameter were of nearly the same size he called the vessel 'Napf' for which there is no translation at all but what might be referred to as a kind of pot or mug without handle. Mugs with a small and narrow foot were referred to as goblets respectively cups (Kelch).

Plates and mugs on a high stand were named fruit stands (Fruchtständer). Ayoub's types defined by proportion were supplied by containers characterized by their size, as there were miniature vessels including most of the forms already mentioned and large storage vessels (Ayoub 1982, 34). Unfortunately particular measures are missing in Ayoub's study, but Yaseen gave an idea of heights in cm: He also described miniature forms of types and stated that they were smaller than 7 cm. Beakers were usually around 13 cm high and thus belonged to the group of small vessels characterized by a height of 7–14 cm. Medium-sized vessels measured 14–28 cm and large specimen were even higher than that (Yaseen 1995, 42. 47. 59). Similar divisions into small, medium and large-sized pottery respectively closed and open forms could be observed in all studies and caused further subdivisions according to the particular author. Especially 'jar' is a worn out term including a wide range of bulbous vessels without real comparability from one study to the other.

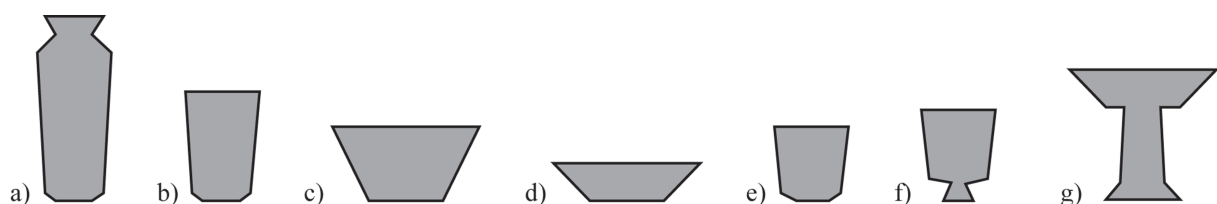


Fig. 5. Schematic illustration of vessel forms according to Ayoub 1982:
a) bottle, b) beaker, c) bowl, d) plate, e) mug, f) goblet, g) fruit stand.

Despite all differences especially between terminologies, some general statements on Middle Bronze Age pottery were at least made by all authors: They all observed that Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian pottery was usually produced on a fast turning wheel except for miniature vessels and large storage containers. The latter consisted of different parts joined together and recently it was suggested by Gabutti that their transitions might have been covered and strengthened by ribs or bands which were a characteristic decoration on certain storage types (Gabutti 2002-03, 96).

The clay material was of inferior quality because it had not been elutriated and therefore contained impurities. In addition to that it was tempered with organic fibers such as chaff and dung or with mineral particles like sand. On the basis of analyzed material from Tell ed-Dēr / Sippar-Amnanum it could be stated that there was no connection between the sort of temper and the vessel type for which it had been used (Franken & Kalsbeek 1984, 81f.). After a first phase of drying a surplus of material was cut away from the walls to make them thinner, especially in the case of the drinking vessels. The surface was smoothed but usually not covered with any kind of slip. Most common was a buff color, its shade depending on the firing process, but except for the so-called Gray Ware there did not seem to have been any intention to influence it (Delougaz 1952, 32; Gabutti 2002-03, 96).

Most of the vessels were undecorated but some showed incisions, engraving, applications or several kinds of impressions horizontally around their upper part. Painting in form of dark monochrome ribbons or geometric patterns occurred quite rarely and were mainly confined to beakers and other small vessels; figurative ornaments were even less frequent. Though decoration itself was rare, mixtures of different decoration styles on a single vessel were not unusual.

One exception from the common plain pottery was the Gray Ware represented by one single type of a small vessel with lugs and a high ring base hiding a convex bottom. It is named after its gray ground color and decorated with white incrustated

incisions. Delougaz even observed some traces of red painting so that there might have been a polychrome effect (Delougaz 1952, 119f.). Gray Ware is restricted to the Isin-Larsa period and therefore possesses a chronological validity.

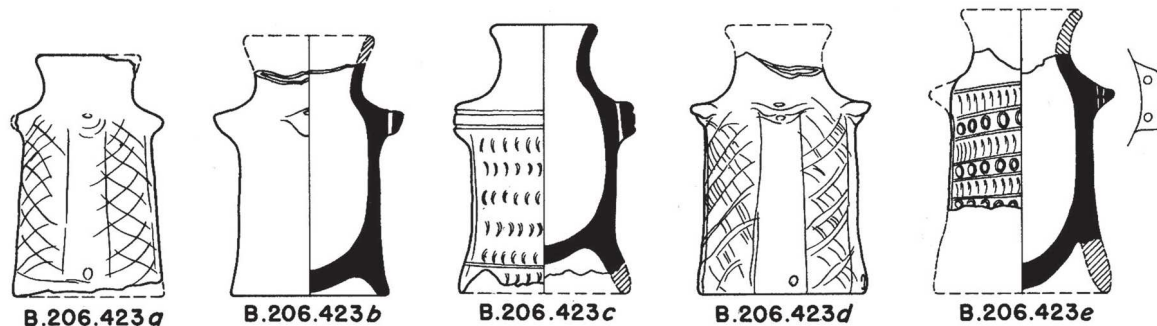


Fig. 6. Gray Ware (scale 1:5; Delougaz 1952, Pl. 152).

All authors agreed that drinking vessels were the most significant group of pottery regardless whether they called them beaker, cup or goblet – Gasche *et al.* and Armstrong even confined their analysis to these closed form types.⁹ A second important group was represented by open forms such as bowls and plates. Both groups and some further characteristics of other vessel types were of chronological evidence as I would like to demonstrate with the example of Tell Yelkhi according to the study of Antonella Gabutti.¹⁰ Yelkhi does not only have the advantage of providing a pottery sequence worked on just lately and being quite well stratified, but also the fact that some of its findings were already considered in the older studies at least by Yaseen and Gasche.

The Early Isin-Larsa contexts at Yelkhi still show influences from the Ur III period represented by several characteristic types such as carinated bowls, beakers with round base and carinated rim as well as by elongated ovoid jars with extended rims and fl at bases. There is a joint development of late Ur III and early Isin-Larsa pottery that can be observed in stratum VI b and a. Ur III traditions are even handed down into the evolved Isin-Larsa period.¹¹

⁹ Gasche *et al.* 1998, 26: "In our presentation of the pottery sequence we focus on three groups of closed shapes: goblets, jars, and cups. What is most important about these vessels, in contrast with the rest of the corpus, is that there are sufficient data about each of them to trace their morphological and technological evolution through the middle centuries of the second millennium."

¹⁰ A. Gabutti, 2002-03. La ceramica dei livelli VIb-III, in G. Bergamini, A. Gabutti & E. Valtz, La ceramica di Tell Yelkhi, *Mesopotamia* 37-38, 87-263.

¹¹ Gabutti 2002-03, 99: "L'orizzonte ceramico del V livello continua senza interruzione il repertorio die VI, arricchendolo nel contempo di nuove morfologie. La diffusa presenzadi tipi diagnostici Isin-Larsa (...) e la presenza, sia pure minima, di ceramic grigia consentono di datare il livello V al pieno period Isin-Larsa. La presenza die morfologie di origine più antica (...) testimonia comunque una notevole persistenza die tradizioni Ur III."

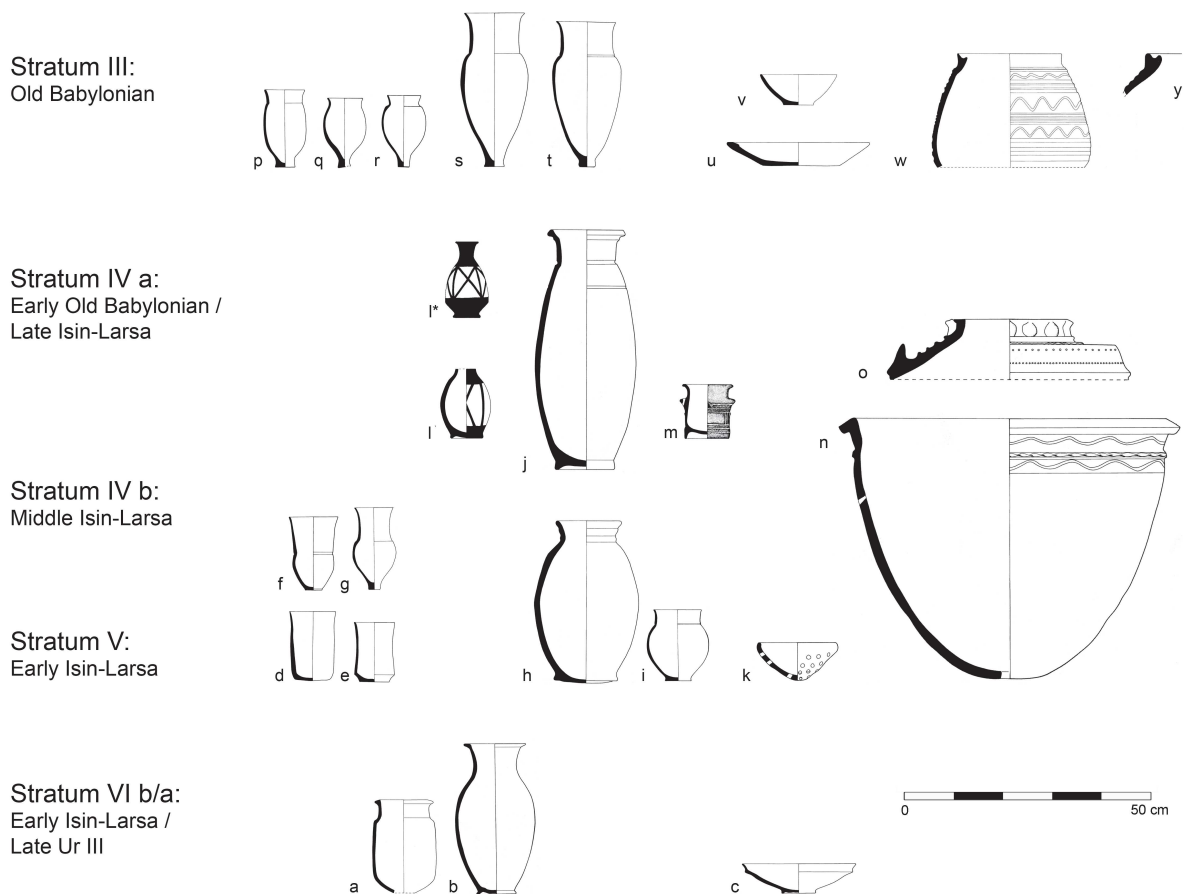


Fig. 7. Case study – Tell Yelkhi:

Pottery forms characteristic of their level, excluded are types running through the sequence (after Gabutti 2002-03, Pl. 66, 7 [a]; 93, 5 [b]; 39, 1 [c]; 61, 12. 15 [d, e]; 70, 6. 14 [f, g]; 95, 2 [h]; 73, 8 [i]; 108, 2 [j]; 131, 6 [k]; 74, 14 [l]; 134, 1 [m]; 50, 11 [n]; 81, 15 [o]; 169, 6.8.9 [p, q, r]; 77, 6.7 [s, t]; 25, 6 [u]; 29, 12 [v]; 121, 10. 11 [w, y]; Ayoub 1982, 95, type 25 Fig. 5 [l*]).

The latter's range of specific types includes cylindrical or slightly concave and sometimes carinated beakers and cups, i.e. footed beakers with a high neck of nearly the same size as its body's height. Necks are characteristic as well for bulbous pots and elongated jars which show a decoration with horizontal bands around. The already mentioned Gray Ware and the new type of strainers concentrate mainly on the Isin-Larsa period. Piriform jars with black painted patterns are a rare but characteristic specimen as well.

Specific storage vessels occur either with a column band under their rims as closed form or with horizontal bands of ridges and incisions as open form. Decorated open form storage vessels and beakers are the most common pottery types in the Isin-Larsa strata V and IV b at Yelkhi.

There is no real break between the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian period, older types such as beakers, conical bowls, strainers and smaller bulbous pots with necks are just running out.¹² Storage vessels with ridges and incisions also become rare but show a new chronological evident feature: a U-shaped rim.

¹² *Ibid.* 100: "In conclusione, il IV livello è caratterizzato da un lato dalla drastica riduzione di tipi distintivi del livello precedente (...) e dall' altro dalla comparsa, soprattutto in IVa, di tipologie nuove, che anticipano morfologie di III livello. In base al repertorio ceramico il livello IV può essere quindi considerato un livello di transizione tra il periodo Isin-Larsa e quello paleobabilonese."

In the Old Babylonian period the type range seems to impoverish but there also occur new specific forms such as plates and hemispherical bowls. Other important types are elongated cups with a shorter neck than in Isin-Larsa times and footed bottles with a high neck that resemble morphologically to cups. The fine ware is of high quality as particularly emphasized by Delougaz (1952, 124) and Gasche *et al.* (1998, 31).

The Old Babylonian period is represented in strata IV a and III at Yelkhi, III showing already a trend towards the Kassite pottery style with its wide respectively slight forms. The case study of Tell Yelkhi illustrates a continuous pottery development during the Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian time. Round and bulbous vessels are removed by elongated and more graceful types in succession. The center of gravity shifts from the lower part of the body upwards to pronounced shoulders. And though the diversity of forms is reduced, the quality at least of the fine ware increases.

This corresponds to the conclusions drawn in the previously considered comprehensive studies by Delougaz, Ayoub, Yaseen, Gasche *et al.* and Armstrong despite all differences in space and terminology between them. They agree that the material culture is subject to modifications but no alienation effect can be stated at all, and it therefore preserves its uniform character.

So it makes sense to me to set up a chronological system which allows to speak of the pottery development and its different stages in the Diyala region in neutral terms. It should be independent from the dynastic system of southern Babylonia which cannot be assigned one-to-one further north where local dynasties overlap and spatial fragmentation impends to complicate any comparison between different sites. Sub-divided in an adequate number of sub-phases, Middle Bronze Age might serve as such a neutral term to describe these fluent transitions within an extensively standardized pottery complex.