



Book Reviews

PAINTING POTS, PAINTING PEOPLE: LATE NEOLITHIC CERAMICS IN ANCIENT MESOPOTAMIA BY WALTER CRUELLS, INNA MATEICIUCOVÁ AND OLIVIER NIEUWENHUYSE (eds)

Oxbow Books, 2017. 240pp, 135 B&W illus, 28 col pls, 13 tables, ISBN 978-1-78570-439-0, hb, £45.00

In January 2012, a group of archaeologists met in Rejvíc, near Brno in the Czech Republic, to share recent and ongoing research and to establish a working group on Late Neolithic ceramics in the ancient Near East. This volume, edited by Olivier Nieuwenhuyse, Walter Cruells, and Inna Mateiciucová, represents the papers presented and the overall discussion. At the time of the meeting, the armed conflict in Syria was less than a year old. Five years later, when the editors wrote their introduction to the collection of papers (Chapter 1), the Syrian conflict had escalated into civil war with no resolution in sight. The editors express their shock and sadness at this turn of events, both in terms of 'friends and colleagues whose lives have become uprooted' and their own 'firm commitment to the cultural heritage of the peoples of Syria, Iraq, south-eastern Turkey [and] Lebanon' (p.7). They suggest that pottery specialists can contribute to safeguarding Mesopotamian archaeological heritage (p.7). This volume is indeed significant in that context.

The meeting in Rejvíc was prompted by an accumulation of data arising from rapid increase in the rate and extent of fieldwork in the region, along with a feeling that specialists of Mesopotamian pottery had no established forum for sharing and developing their research (p.2). As a working group was thus created in Rejvíc, the initial task was to define both 'Late Neolithic' and 'the Near East', while at the same time acknowledging the diversity that both those labels contain (p.3) – a conundrum familiar to all archaeologists today as we face the need to simultaneously manage and make sense of vast amounts of data. As the editors point out, the 'terminological jungle of cultural traditions' (p.4) reflects both the diversity and the sheer amount of information now available about the Late Neolithic in the region. As the title demonstrates, the scope of the volume is made more manageable by focusing on painted pottery.

Presumably to help readers navigate this data jungle, many of the 18 research papers that make up the volume provide a summary of the research background to the specific area, site, and/or pottery style they are focusing on. This is useful, especially for the uninitiated reader, albeit repetitive at times. The first paper, written by co-editor Walter Cruells (Chapter 2), continues the discussion of the wider typo-chronological framework that is touched upon in the editors' introduction. It is clear that a step back to reconsider and accommodate new

radiocarbon chronologies for significant ceramic transitions is overdue, and Cruells provides useful overviews of the first emergence of pottery in the region and the later emergence of the Halaf style. Interestingly, both these ‘transitions’ were gradual, localised, and *not* accompanied by changes in, for example, architecture or economy. This circumstance is a reminder to archaeologists everywhere that a change in pottery design or manufacture need not signal wider cultural or demographic transformation.

The other papers in the volume tend to be more specific in focus, honing in on aspects such as pigments and firing techniques used in pottery decoration (e.g. Marie Le Mière, Mihriban Özbaşaran and Maurice Picon), contrasts and colours thus produced (e.g. Olivier Nieuwenhuyse), or the interpretation of animal motifs on pottery (e.g. Béatrice Robert and Loïc Daverat; Mücella Erdalkiran). A handful of papers report on the painted pottery found at specific sites (e.g. Jörg Becker’s paper on Tell Tawila; Lech Czerniak’s and Joanna Pyzel’s paper on Çatalhöyük East; Rana Özbal’s paper on Tell Kurdu; Frank Hole’s paper on Umm Qseir), generally by placing these – often recently excavated – assemblages into their regional context. Indeed, the reader is prepared for the particularist approach taken in many of the papers since the editors highlight in their introduction (p.5) that the majority of contributors address the social contexts of painted pottery rather than continuing in the traditional vein of generalising art-historical or typological study.

Nonetheless, the social contexts of making and using painted pottery are at times difficult to detect within the papers. The legacy of typological culture-historical archaeology in combination with a new-ish set of archaeometric techniques make many of the papers rather data-heavy with little room for exploration of the human context.

Yet when more ‘social’ interpretations are put forward, several key points are made that – again – have wider applicability. For example, in his study of how potters achieved colour contrasts on painted pottery, Olivier Nieuwenhuyse points out that *touch* is an underexplored aspect of archaeological pottery (p.122). We are perhaps particularly prone to overlook the ‘tactile communication’ of visually striking pottery. I would add that weight is another aspect of the tactile experience of using pottery that we rarely consider, at least not within contexts that pre-date the conspicuously heavy amphorae of the Roman world. Another relevant point is made by Marie Hopwood (Chapter 15) in that the design of a pot is ‘activated’ when it is used, and that pots and food transform one another both symbolically and physically in the acts of cooking, eating, and drinking. A third example of an argument that deserves to be reiterated in many different contexts is presented by Josep-Miquel Faura and Miquel Molist (Chapter 6) in their review of painted pottery from Tell Halula in Syria, which they demonstrate as *not* having evolved from simple to complex. Most archaeologists today would of course instinctively question a unilinear development of anything, anyway – but ask someone uninitiated to arrange a collection of pottery in chronological order and the ‘finest’ vessels will inevitably be deemed to

be the most recent. The paper by Faura and Molist is a good example of the inapplicability of that assumption.

The volume is set out along four themes: chronologies, colour and decorative style, communication and symbolic meaning, and pottery in broader context (p.5). A more user-friendly division of papers could have been to explicitly distinguish between those that are site-specific and those that are thematic. Both sets of papers have their advantages, but it is likely that primarily researchers who specialise in the region will want to look at the site-specific papers whereas the thematic papers are of wider interest. It is perhaps a sign of the increasingly interdisciplinary times that some of the most successful thematic papers are those that consider painted pottery in relation to something else. These include the aforementioned papers by Bèatrice Robert and Loïc Daverat on pottery and pigs and by Marie Hopwood on pottery and food, as well as those by Bonnie Nilhamn on painted plaster (Chapter 18), and by Catherine Breniquet on pottery and textile (Chapter 19).

Another structure-related question is why both abstracts and introductions are included in the papers, as they are in most cases either repetitive or contradictory. The light-touch editorial approach has also resulted in quite a few spelling and grammar mistakes. The fact that English is not the first language of most contributors could perhaps have been more robustly addressed in the editorial process. On the other hand, with English as the lingua franca of academic research perhaps we should accept that it sometimes needs to be a little elastic? In terms of images, it is excellent that so many colour plates of this handsome pottery are included, although those are easily missed as they are placed at the end of the volume and duplicated in greyscale within the papers.

To conclude, despite these minor quibbles the authors and editors have thoroughly and enthusiastically created a valuable set of very detailed papers. As a whole the volume certainly gives the reader a glimpse of the wealth of ceramic evidence that was emerging in Upper Mesopotamia, south-eastern Anatolia, and the northern Levant before the Syrian civil war put a stop to archaeological fieldwork in many parts of the region. It is a rich source of information that will be drawn upon for decades, and it will undoubtedly contribute to the process of reclaiming and celebrating Mesopotamian archaeological heritage.

Emilie Sibbesson

Canterbury Christ Church University

Review submitted: June 2018

The views expressed in this review are not necessarily those of the Society or the Reviews Editor