



Book Reviews

RELENTLESSLY PLAIN: SEVENTH MILLENNIUM CERAMICS AT TELL SABI ABYAD, SYRIA, EDITED BY OLIVER P. NIEUWENHUYSE

Oxbow Books, Oxford, 2018. 396pp, 253 figs and 31 col pls, 121 tables, hb, ISBN 978-1-78925-084-8, £60.00

A 400 page volume on pottery entitled 'Relentlessly Plain' presents an interesting challenge to the reviewer hoping to demonstrate that it is of more than just specialist interest. In fact the book does not wholly deliver on the 'promise' of its title, since there is some decorated pottery in the story – but nevertheless this is, *prima facie*, a volume for 'sherd nerds', being wholly concerned with an assemblage of 7th millennium BC pottery from a site in the Balikh valley in northern Syria. Crucially, however, this material is also part of a much wider story, relating to the key questions of when, how and why Neolithic ceramic technology first appeared, and it should therefore appeal to anyone with an interest in those issues.

This is not wholly unfamiliar material: a summary of the early pottery from Tell Sabi Abyad (TSA) was published a few years ago (Nieuwenhuys *et al.* 2010) while broader trans-regional comparisons have been considered in a recent edited volume (Tsuneki *et al.* 2017) and are not a major part of the argument here. Instead we get the data and the detail, including sections on analytical procedures (Chapter 3) and quantitative trends over time (Chapter 11) that will be of interest to anyone dealing with large and/or multi-phase pottery assemblages. The size of the assemblage, even from some of the earlier levels, is impressive (p.286) and allows a quantitative approach to the development of early pottery that is not available for many other sites (cf. Last 2005).

The book, which has various contributors but is mainly authored by the editor, is well-written and well-produced, though further editing could have tightened the arguments and reduced the word count: there is a lot of detail on some minor points, such as the formation processes of much later deposits (pp.324–5), while a lengthy discussion of trends in sherd density has to be treated with caution given the reliance on estimated soil volumes (pp.283–6), and the conclusions sometimes just recapitulate what has been said in previous chapters. However, the case is made steadily and by the end the reader should be convinced that a lot of our old assumptions about the introduction of pottery in the Near East are simplistic or just wrong.

Of course, pottery lost its primary role in defining the Neolithic in this region as soon as a Pre-Pottery phase had been identified – although that label is somewhat misleading given the evidence for at least some experiments with ceramics in the PPN (Fletcher *et al.* 2017; Nieuwenhuys and Campbell 2017, 170), as well as the early use of clay for mudbricks, plaster (including ‘White Ware’ containers) and figurines, etc. The wider picture has been further complicated by more recent awareness of the great time-depth of pottery use in parts of East Asia and North Africa (eg, Jordan *et al.* 2016). Nevertheless, understanding the adoption of pottery in the Near East is still important, not just in its own terms but also because it is fundamental to the westward spread of Neolithic practices into Europe and the subsequent emergence of complex societies within western Asia. A couple of decades ago the emergence of potting seemed like a fairly straightforward component of a linked series of Late Neolithic developments (Moore 1995) but the data from sites like TSA show that reality was far more complicated. In demonstrating that the emergence of pottery was not a simple case of a new technology being introduced, improved and expanded in a steady evolutionary progression, Nieuwenhuys provides food for thought for anyone interested in understanding innovation and technological change in prehistory.

This is a volume concerned principally with variation over time rather than space. The architecture revealed within the part of the site under consideration is only briefly discussed (pp.23–9) while the depositional context of the pottery (Chapter 13) is studied in terms of deposit types (floors, room fills, open areas, etc) rather than spatial distributions. Nor is this a volume that seeks to break down specialist boundaries by looking at relationships with other material categories, barring some discussion of other types of container (see below).

Instead the focus is on stratigraphic and chronological sequences. The oldest pottery at TSA is dated to the first three centuries of the 7th millennium cal BC (the Initial Pottery Neolithic), which is earlier than in the southern Levant, where pottery appeared in the second half of the millennium (p.8), but more or less contemporary with the earliest pottery in central Anatolia (Bayliss *et al.* 2015). However, rather than something crude and experimental, the initial pottery appears already fully developed – because it derives entirely from another site some 120 km to the east (based on chemical analysis outlined in Chapter 9). This Early Mineral Ware (EMW) is well-made, burnished and occasionally decorated, and would have been suitable for cooking with, but, counter-intuitively, it was replaced in the Early Pottery Neolithic, around 6700 cal BC, by something worse. This is the ‘relentlessly plain’ Standard Ware (SW), a much coarser pottery tempered with plant material which produced fabrics unsuitable for use in cooking. The results of lipid residue analysis indicate that it was used to store dry goods (Chapter 15) and only much later in the 7th millennium did new types of mineral-tempered ware appear, suggesting a sustained shift towards cooking in pots (p.11). The key point in explaining the replacement of

EMW by SW is that the latter was locally made. Again it is only towards the end of the EPN that a renewed presence of imported vessels is evidenced, including the Dark-Faced Burnished Ware familiar from other sites in the wider region.

The central part of the book presents a discussion and catalogue of the different wares, dominated by SW. The illustrations, which make up almost half the volume, provide a good representation of the assemblage, though surface textures are not indicated on the drawings, so the reader is reliant on the colour plates at the end of the volume to get a sense of what the plain pottery looked and felt like. What emerges from the discussion is a sense of the developments within this ware over the 450 years and eight levels of the EPN, including changes in fabrics (p.47), surface treatment (p.57) and firing (p.64), as well as vessel size (p.71) and shape (p.75). Despite the range of forms increasing over time, however, typology remains a tricky exercise: for example, 'The complete jars highlight the complexity and to some extent the artificiality of our formal classification ... our neat formal categorizations constructed on the basis of the size of the neck translate in overlapping categories with diffuse boundaries' (p.89).

The manufacturing process is discussed in detail, with interesting aspects including the use of mats, baskets and pit moulds in forming and shaping (pp.52–3). The presence of loop handles and cordons provides some evidence, albeit ambiguous, as to how pots were intended to be moved around and used (pp.71–4). An unusual feature is the practice of applying plaster to the surfaces of vessels, often the larger storage pots; it is suggested this may have served to help keep their contents cool (p.251), though plastering was also one means of effecting repairs (pp.258–65).

Despite the title, another key issue concerns the emergence of decoration. The best known pottery of the Neolithic sequence at TSA is the vividly painted Halaf style, which has its roots in a 'pre-Halaf' phase, starting around 6250 cal BC. As with the development of other aspects of SW, rather than a rapid transformation there is a 'slow but perceptible rise' of decoration (p.379), which includes a variety of techniques. This gradual upturn precedes a 'painted pottery revolution' in the succeeding Transitional Period (p.380), when other decorative techniques were abandoned (p.12).

Nieuwenhuys's interpretation of the role of pottery remains primarily functional, even though early pottery in other regions has been interpreted in different terms (eg, Vitelli 1995). However the potential for pots having a greater social or symbolic value is seen, for example, in the suggestion of deliberate breakage to facilitate a visible repair (p.265) and their role in burials, since part of the area under study became a cemetery during the pre-Halaf phase (Chapter 14). In the graves the selection of small, plain SW pots might indicate the container was less

significant than its contents, but the authors suggest that perhaps the household was being deliberately represented in opposition to wider regional identities (p.352).

The early pottery may be functional but its precise uses remain hard to pin down. SW was not cooking ware, as mentioned, nor did larger vessels designed for storage appear till later in the EPN, as the forming technology improved. In some wares, decoration may have been used to differentiate smaller groups of serving vessels (p.115). Rather than a single function, the 'jumps and bumps' in the ceramic record (p.367), which the volume charts well, imply that experimentation and variability were key; the early SW was 'simply not very good' and 'a far cry from the very sophisticated, diversified ... ware' found at the end of the EPN (p.368). Whatever the role of the earliest locally made pottery it stimulated diversification and improvement. Similarly, rather than simply copying materials such as basketry or White Ware, as has been suggested in the past, engagement with these technologies seems to have been part of the development of ceramic techniques: the period during which pottery increased exponentially was one of 'shifting associations between ceramic and other containers' (p.367).

The evidence that pottery developed through a process of experimentation supports the author's hypothesis that it was complicit in the transformation of society, rather than merely a reflection of change. However, further elucidation of the functional and social roles of pottery in the EPN will require a different approach, as Nieuwenhuys acknowledges. While some comparison of the ceramic sequence with patterns of faunal exploitation is attempted (p.375), ultimately he concedes that we have 'a frustratingly poor grasp of the constitution of Neolithic societies' (p.378). When that improves, this volume will provide a solid – dare I say over-engineered – foundation for developing a broader perspective.

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