CHAPTER VII: CONCLUSIONS

Listen again. One evening at the close of Ramadan, ere the better moon arose, in that old potter’s shop I stood alone with the clay population round in rows.

And strange to tell, among that earthen lot some could articulate, while others not: and suddenly one more impatient cried, “Who is the Potter, pray, and who the Pot?”
Omar Khayyam (The Rubaiyat, verses LIX and LX)

The last chapter in this study will present the conclusions drawn from the present work, and an outlook on directions for future research. Since each of the former chapters (IV, V and VI) already summarizes the conclusions drawn in those chapters, we do not need to repeat them again here. Rather, this is the place to reflect on the results as well as on the many new questions raised.

VII.1 The ceramic sequence

Chapter IV presented an extensive overview of the ceramics at the site, the developments between levels and the comparisons with other sites. Suggestions for relative and absolute dating of the Sabi Abyad sequence were also presented. As such, Chapter IV fulfils one of the basic requirements of the documentation and publication of the fieldwork at Sabi Abyad. It provides excavators of other contemporary sites and students of survey material with a well-documented collection of comparison material. However, this study only discussed part of all the Late Bronze Age ceramics excavated at the site until now, and fieldwork is still in progress. Future publications of the Middle Assyrian ceramics from Sabi Abyad can build on the framework presented here, while at the same time choosing a different focus and explore areas not covered here.

A clear break was visible, as expected, between the assemblage of level 7 and those of levels 6 to 3. At first sight this distinction between the “Mitanni” level and the Middle Assyrian occupation of the site is straightforward. There seems to be a chronological as well as a cultural (if not political) break between the two. Another major difference between level 7 and the Middle Assyrian levels is the absence of evidence for local pottery production in level 7, whereas the assemblages in levels 6 to 4 are dominated by pottery produced by the workshops at the site. Since these workshops were affiliated with the Middle Assyrian royal estate administration and aimed at efficient production of large amounts of utilitarian vessels (see Chapter V), the assemblages in these levels leave a more uniform impression than the more varied collection from level 7. In contrast, the assemblage in level 7 most probably originated from more than one source, and was most probably produced in a less rigidly organized production tradition with more room or demand for decorations, special shapes and finishing.

However, there is also much continuity between the two assemblages. Typical Middle Assyrian shapes (carinated bowls, goblets, etc.) already occurred in rather large numbers in level 7. Other vessels, with shapes and decorations generally seen as typical of the Mitanni period (rounded bowls, “grain measures,” carinated bowls with white inlayed decoration, red painted bands, etc.) still occur in the Middle Assyrian levels. If we use the term “Middle Assyrian” strictly in the chronological / geographical sense, meaning the Jezira east of the Euphrates in the 13th and 12th centuries BC, we should then conclude that there were at least two Middle Assyrian ceramic traditions. On the one hand, some potters continued to produce pots in the traditions prevalent in the region before, or produced pottery at home, while on the other hand those potters affiliated to the official administration produced a rather uniform collection of utilitarian wares at the order of the administration. This would mean that in Middle Assyrian times one could distinguish an “official” production and a “local” or “domestic” production, as was concluded by P. Pfälzner (1995). However, it is probably more realistic to suggest that the term Middle Assyrian has cultural and political connotations as well, as was suggested by Pfälzner (1995: 232-232). In fact, the Assyrians themselves often mentioned the
“other” people living in their territory in the provinces: in Sabi Abyad mainly Šubareans and Suteans, who were the people living in the area before the Assyrians came. It seems that the distinction in the Middle Assyrian state between “official” or “state-owned” and “non-official” was hardly relevant, and that private and state business were closely intertwined. In that case, the term “official Middle Assyrian production” is meaningless, especially in the provinces. If the appearance and uniformity of the Middle Assyrian pottery is related to the organization of its production, we may assume that all pottery we recognize as Middle Assyrian (characterized by a striking uniformity over the whole region) was produced in a production organization similar to the one described here for Sabi Abyad. Indeed, until now all excavated Middle Assyrian sites have proved to be state-organized. The presence at Sabi Abyad of pottery that relates much more to other, more ancient traditions must then be studied in the light of the presence of different social, cultural or ethnic groups in the area and the contacts between them and the Assyrians of the dunnu.

Either way, the continuity of 14th century ceramic traditions in the Middle Assyrian levels raises questions about the dating of survey material in the Late Bronze Age Jezirah. More chronological control, not only over Middle Assyrian ceramics but especially over non-Middle Assyrian material, would open new directions of research into the organization of the empire and the regional dynamics between Middle Assyrian dunnu or cities and other settlements or non-settled populations. The inhabitants of Sabi Abyad had regular contacts with other regions, as we already know from the cuneiform texts. Several pottery vessels were transported or imported to the site, either for their contents or for their specific technical properties. Comparisons of these vessels with assemblages from other sites, as well as the archaeometric analyses, suggested links with the Euphrates and Khabur regions, southern Anatolia and the Syrian coast.

Despite the striking similarity of Middle Assyrian pottery assemblages all over the Jezirah region, several aspects of the assemblage seemed to be peculiar to Sabi Abyad. Some shape variants were not or less often found at other Middle Assyrian sites, while chronological developments were not always mirrored elsewhere. Although the assemblage in levels 6 to 3 looked similar throughout the sequence, it is interesting to see that there were many changes from level to level as well. Some types were present only in one or two levels, while other types increased or decreased in popularity over time. In addition, within many types minor differences in rim shapes and vessel wall shapes could be noted. The securely dated sequence from Sabi Abyad thus provides a tool for the relative dating of other collections, especially at sites where dates from cuneiform texts are absent so far. A topic not fully explored in this thesis are the processes behind these finer chronological changes. Partly, answers to this question can be found in Chapter V, dealing with the organization of production. Changes in the scale and intensity of production as well as in the organization of production may be related to formal changes in the vessels themselves. Changes in consumer demands, partly explored in Chapter VI, may be involved as well. However, from a more general theoretical point of view as well as from other perspectives (e.g. style, fashion, tradition, differences between individuals, learning patterns) the reasons behind change in material culture deserve more study.

A methodological problem that became apparent during the work on Chapter IV as well as Chapter V, as in many other publications of material culture, is that of the comparability of different typologies and classification systems. Many aspects of the current study, including formal comparisons and relative dating, but also questions dealing with standardization, technology, and other aspects of production organization, would greatly benefit from comparisons with data from other sites. However, and not surprisingly, data are hardly ever presented in such a way as to be easily accessible for questions other than those put to the material in that specific publication. Unfortunately, therefore, most conclusions had to remain limited to the Sabi Abyad data only. Although in this study I tried to keep the data as transparent as possible, by offering raw data in tables allowing others to recalculate them according to their own groups and classes, others will meet the same problems using this thesis as well. Each study collects and organizes data differently, because each project has its own particular research questions. Without expecting or aiming at a standardized way of pottery recording or publication, our field would benefit from more consideration both with practical classification systems as well as with publication formats. The French initiative of “collection référentiel,” offering integrated digital and printed publications that in theory allow for complete databases to be distributed, is very interesting in this context.

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VII.2 The techniques and organization of pottery production

Chapter V reconstructed the organization of pottery production, using a variety of sources as pieces of the puzzle. But in itself, the conclusions from this chapter and this thesis are themselves pieces of an even larger puzzle that of the reconstruction of Middle Assyrian society. A similar approach to other groups of artefacts or material remains from Middle Assyrian sites, integrating textual information with a reconstruction of production technology and organization, would be needed to complete the picture. Interesting subjects seem to be metalworking, building and architecture, food processing, and seal and stone cutting, among others.

When we stay within the area of pottery production, a comparative approach on two levels would greatly increase the value of this study and the insights into the development of pottery production at large. As I stated at the beginning of Chapter V, many terms used in this and similar studies are relative. They are only meaningful when compared to the same aspects in other production organizations. Whereas the present study mainly concentrated on the material from Sabi Abyad, it would be very interesting to broaden the scope of the topic both geographically or culturally as well as chronologically. Contemporary assemblages from other regions, as well as assemblages from earlier and later (e.g. Neo-Assyrian) contexts in the same region, could be studied in a similar way. This would result in a broader view of the variety of different production organizations in the Near East as well as of the relations between the Sabi Abyad pottery organization and other systems. The main task would then be to explain the changes in production organization and the differences between organizations in various regions, sites or periods, thus reaching a deeper understanding of the relations between society and production organization.

What has been most apparent during the work on Chapter V, is the complexity both of the topic and of the models employed to study it, models which are mainly derived from ethnoarchaeology. Although at first sight the literature about pottery production organization seems to be rather practical, there are some serious problems underlying these models. One of the most pressing issues is the often-unclear relation between the different aspects that are studied. The task for archaeology and ethnoarchaeology is not just to study or describe the state of variables like spatial arrangement of facilities, standardization of products, scale of production, craft specialization, function of the products, consumer population, and so on, but first and foremost to study the relationships between these variables of production organization. It seems clear that most aspects of production organization are interdependent or related, but the nature and causality of the relations is not always clear. Since in ethnoarchaeological cases there are theoretically fewer “unknowns” and it should be easier to control different variables, more studies from this field dealing with pottery production organization are still much needed. Even if this study did perhaps not present much information on the nature of the relation between the different aspects of pottery production, I hope that the detailed presentation of information on each of the different aspects from a site that yielded so much information on production in antiquity, combined with the story of Middle Assyrian society and craft production at large, will at least present a body of material that can be used for further theoretical research into the topic.

VII.3 The functions and uses of the Middle Assyrian ceramics

A better insight into the purposes for which vessels were made and into the way pottery was used has proved to add a lively and colourful dimension to the reconstruction of ceramics in the society at Sabi Abyad. Although the information from texts and iconography is scarce for this period, a combination of various different sources of information has yielded interesting insights. Again, broadening this part of the study towards other contemporary sites and towards assemblages from other periods would be useful. Partly this has already been done for Babylonian pottery (Sallaberger 1996). A topic that could not be explored in this study was residu analysis. A future research programme of pottery at Sabi Abyad could be designed to include an extensive sampling programme aimed at acquiring information on the ancient contents or uses of the vessels. Especially vessels used in beer production (on which a lot of textual information is available) and cooking vessels would be interesting objects for study.

As was stated earlier, this study has prepared the ground for a comprehensive spatial and functional analysis of the settlement of Sabi Abyad. Especially if other categories of artefacts were studied in a similar
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way, such an analysis would yield extremely interesting insights into the organization and functioning of a 
dunnu settlement in the provinces.

VII.4 Middle Assyrian pottery production and technological style

When asking why a certain technology is used and not another, or why artefacts look the way they do, 
craftsmen would probably often answer “I don’t know, this is just the way we do it”. That does not mean an 
anthropologist or archaeologist should not enquire about the (social, political, ritual, economic, etc.) 
mechanisms and processes that are behind or embedded in a technological action. In the past chapters we 
have seen in detail what the Middle Assyrian pottery looked like and how it changed through time. We have 
studied the way it was made, which techniques were used for paste preparation, shaping, finishing and firing. 
Several suggestions were made as to the ultimate functions and uses of the pottery. However, although all 
these aspects were explicitly placed in the cultural, organizational, political and economic background of 
Middle Assyrian society (as far as we know it), the question “why” was not fully explored in this study. Why 
does the pottery look the way it does, with these characteristic nipple-based goblets, carinated bowls and 
oval jars? Why do minor changes occur over time? Why were certain shaping techniques used and not others 
that would have yielded similar or even better results? Why was pottery production organized the way we 
think it was? Was other craft production organized similarly? The past chapters have discussed only part of 
the answers to these questions. They focussed on chronology, production organization and function/use of 
vessels.

An increasing body of literature is exploring technical behaviour as social production, such as the 
and Hoffman (1994) and Miller (1985). They convincingly show that the answer to the question “why did 
they do it in this way” can no longer exclusively be “because that is how they did it, tradition”, or “because 
environmental or engineering constraints forced them to do it this way”. Rather, the study of technological 
style and technological choices opens up a rich and powerful way for archaeologists to reach conclusions 
about the way society functioned. It is increasingly clear that the symbolical, social or other role of pottery 
and pottery production in Mesopotamian society is important when we want to fully understand the subject.

The typical nipple-based goblets may serve as an example. If we look at these vessels from a 
utilitarian or technical point of view only, we cannot explain the presence of the characteristic nipple-shaped 
bases. Not only are they difficult to make, requiring special skills from the potter, but the vessels are unable 
to stand because of them. If simple drinking cups were needed, much simpler shapes requiring less technical 
skill would have sufficed: from a technical point of view the addition of a nipple base is redundant. Why 
were nipple bases made, and why only on goblets? Several issues may be included in an attempt to answer 
these questions. For example, because they cannot stand on their base but have to be held in the hand during 
drinking these vessels force a certain body posture and perhaps a social practice (the use of servants to refill 
the cup) during the consumption of liquids. Social practice (traditions of consumption and presentation) and 
vessel shape and technology may have interacted and influenced each other. Or goblets may be ceramic 
imitations of valuable and rare glass cups. The nipple, created as a normal result of the technology of shaping 
a glass vessel, may have been the most characteristic aspect of these glass cups. The social environment may 
have recognized the vessel as a glass imitation because of the shape of the nipple. Here, processes of 
imitation, emulation and status may have played a role in the technical choices made for shaping a drinking 
cup. In another example we may look at the uniformity and recognizability of the Middle Assyrian pottery, 
something that springs to the eye of every archaeologist. Surely the Assyrians themselves recognised this 
pottery as their own as well. It was argued in this thesis that the potters at the dunnu of Sabi Abyad were 
producing vessels for all the dependents of the settlement. We know from texts that these people were often 
ot ethnically Assyrian and that many were displaced from other regions. What did it mean to them to have 
to use Middle Assyrian pottery? Could the uniformity of the pottery have played a purposeful role in the 
incorporation of these people into the Assyrian empire? What meaning did this pottery have for its (Assyrian 
and non-Assyrian) users?

These questions and related problems concerning the technological style and the technological 
choices made by the Assyrian potters, and the relations between technological style and issues like ethnicity,
power, religion, social relations and so on, could not be explored in this thesis. To my opinion, they deserve a more thorough study which I hope to publish separately.
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