Preface

It must have started when my father was digging in his vegetable garden and found a big old bronze key, this fascination with the daily life of people from the past. I was intrigued by the idea that where our strawberries were now growing, other people a long time ago had a meadow with cows and a farm with a big wooden door to which the key would fit... How did these people live? Many years later this fascination was again at the core of my experiences, excavating as a student at Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria. But how on earth did I end up “doing” the pottery from that site? Why did I commit myself to describe thousands and thousands of similar looking sherds, piled up high in dusty brown bags behind me and arriving in growing numbers each day from the field? Weren’t all pottery publications boring lists of types and shapes? But although the fieldwork in the pottery shed was often only bearable due to the pleasant times spent with the people mentioned below, the topic became more and more interesting when I started preparing for this thesis. There is a wealth of literature dealing with pottery both ancient and modern, which goes far beyond the presentation of shapes and chronology. With the archaeological discipline at large the field of pottery studies shares its combination of different technical, theoretical and methodological approaches that makes archaeology such a fascinating field of study. Pottery studies deal with provenance studies, shaping and firing techniques, technical properties of raw materials, with style and decoration, organization of production, workshop layout, the role of pottery and potters in society, symbolism, chronology, trade and interregional contacts, and many more interesting aspects of this ubiquitous find category. This multidimensionality is exactly what is so interesting about archaeology as a discipline. Without taking a particular theoretical position, I have tried in this thesis to combine several approaches or perspectives on pottery, in an attempt to reach a deeper understanding of how the pottery was made, how this production was organized and how the pots were used after they had left the workshop. Through the work on this thesis, the pottery stopped being a boring pile of sherds that had to be published. They started to “talk”, almost as in Omar Khayyam’s pottery workshop (in The Rubayat), giving me clues about the people who made them and the kind of social and cultural environment they were produced and used in.

This book is organized in seven chapters and several appendices. Chapter I will provide the reader with a general background to the history and society of the Middle Assyrian kingdom. It also briefly presents the research questions that form the core of the study. Chapter II offers a detailed description of the methods and techniques used in the excavation, description and publication of the pottery at Tell Sabi Abyad, including definitions of terms, explanations of statistical measures, etc. Chapter III is a summary overview of the stratigraphy and architecture at the site. Chapters IV, V and VI form the core of the thesis. In Chapter IV the pottery is discussed in detail per stratigraphical level, on the basis of a shape typology. The characteristics of the assemblage in each level are discussed (dealing with shape, raw materials, decoration etc.), and comparisons from other sites are cited. The chapter concludes with a short discussion of relative and absolute dating of the assemblages in the various levels. Chapter V collects all information pertaining to the organization of pottery production at the site. The evidence contained in the pottery itself, like traces of shaping techniques and evidence for firing temperatures, is discussed at length. A detailed presentation is given of several pottery workshops and other production locations, pottery kilns and the spatial layout and relation to the rest of the settlement, as well as the tools used by the potters. Textual evidence and information about the standardization, output, and demand is then drawn into the reconstruction of the organization of pottery production at the site. Chapter VI discusses what would have been at the core of the potter’s aims: the function and use of the vessels. Again information from a variety of sources is drawn together to sketch a picture of the function and use of several groups of vessels. A discussion of Assyrian vessel names from texts is part of this chapter. Chapter VII, finally, collects the conclusions and presents an outlook on future research. The Appendices A-G contain many of the raw data on which the chapters are based.
Acknowledgements

A formal occasion for thanking all those who were instrumental in the making of this study has rarely presented itself. Writing the acknowledgements is one of these occasions, and it is with great pleasure that I take the opportunity here to mention those who have assisted me. When I first started out as a “pottery person” on the excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad, I could not have foreseen the many interesting and stimulating contacts that would result from this work.

Funds and facilities are an important part of any project. I had started my PhD self-funded during my appointment as director of the Netherlands Institute for Academic Studies in Damascus. Of crucial importance, however, was the opportunity to work full time for a year to complete the study through a sabbatical scholarship. The sabbatical was financed by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO), under the programme “Vervangingssubsidie Geesteswetenschappen”, grant number 365-62-003. My employer at the time, the Netherlands Institute for the Near East in Leiden, kindly cooperated with the sabbatical. NWO also supported the archaeometric research at the laboratory in Berlin with a travel scholarship, grant number R 28-530. The Foundation for Anthropology and Prehistory in the Netherlands (SNMAP) kindly supported the archaeometric research with a grant to cover the costs of producing the thin-section slides. The German Archaeological Institute (DAI) in Damascus, directed by Karin Bartl, kindly offered me a working space and access to their library. Without their hospitality and support it would not have been easy to keep my working pace and achieve so much in such a short time. The National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden is thanked for offering facilities and access to the excavation databases, stored in the museum. The General Directorate of Antiquities and Museums in Damascus, and its director Bassam Jammous and director of excavations Michel al-Maqdissi and their staff are thanked for their continuous cooperation, especially in exporting small pieces of sherds for thin-section analysis.

This study would not have come together without the support of Peter Akkermans, my supervisor and the director of the archaeological project at Tell Sabi Abyad. Without his permission to study the material and have free access to all the excavation files, this work would of course not have been possible. More importantly, I very much value the friendship that has grown between us over the years, and the many hours of interesting and fruitful discussions on pottery, Sabi Abyad, archaeology in general and life at large.

Over the years in the pottery shed, Tulip Abd-el-Hay, Lauren Brüning, Stefania Facco, Christian Greco, Ghazwan Hmeidy, Daan Isendoorn, Arwa Kharobi, Ewout Koek, Martin Makinson, Lubna Omar, Wendy Richter, Irene Sibbing, Audrey Starrenburg and Tonny de Wit spent many hours collating, glueing, describing, drawing and discussing the sherds. For some of them one season of pottery processing was more than enough; others returned for several seasons or continued with MA papers and PhD theses about pottery from Sabi Abyad or other sites. Most of the description and drawing work for this thesis was done by myself; however, I especially thank Ewout Koek and his team for providing me with databases and drawings of level 6 material from the N-O squares. José Limpens, who wrote her MA thesis on the Middle Assyrian pottery from Sabi Abyad in 1994, kindly provided me with her databases and drawings of material from the central tower. Drawings of several large or complicated shapes were made by Pieter Collet and Mikko Kriek. Mikko also kindly provided me with the site plans used in Chapter III. Salem al-Mukhlif, appointed as a guard for Tell Sabi Abyad but also a trustworthy friend, was responsible for counting the sherds. Moreover, he and his daughter Fatima, together with her cousins, took care of the washing, drying and packing of many thousands of prehistoric and Bronze Age sherds. Nouras al-Mohammed, the government representative at Sabi Abyad, made me part of his loving family and was responsible for many hours of jokes and laughing on site.

The excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad continue. This means that hardly any material is available in its final, published form, and that one has to work with data that are constantly being processed. For this study this was especially apparent in the availability of information on detailed stratigraphy and descriptions of architecture. In this context, my thanks are due to Merel Brüning who is responsible for the stratigraphical databases of the Sabi Abyad project. She has endured many a panicky appeal.
for more information, preferably to be delivered yesterday. In Damascus, Arwa Kharobi has worked hard to digitize thousands of drawings in Illustrator and prepare them for publication. Her perseverance in this rather mind-numbing job is appreciated a lot.

The archaeometric and technical parts of this study relied heavily on help from others. Bram van As and Loe Jacobs from the Department of Pottery Technology, Leiden University, came to the site in 1996 and performed an initial study of shaping techniques of the most important pottery shapes. They also prepared a detailed study of the properties of the raw materials used, based on sherds as well as unfired pottery samples. Both also provided me with critical comments on Chapter V. Gerwulf Schneider and Małgorzata Daszkiewicz of the Free University in Berlin kindly executed performance tests and chemical analysis on two samples of cooking-ware sherds. Moreover, Gerwulf trained me in using the polarizing microscope to describe the fabric of my sherds in thin section, and assisted in the compilation of the archaeometric part of this study. His patience, enthusiasm and culinary abilities were greatly appreciated and drew me through long hours of laboratory work. Abu Shaker from AFPC Damascus helped me in trying to find a possibility for making thin sections in Damascus. Niels Groot from Delft Technical University, kindly took it upon himself to photograph the fresh fractures of the sherds that were studied in thin section.

The hours of stimulating discussions about “the ancients” and their times with Frans Wiggermann were part of making the subject come to life. His contributions to Chapter VI, dealing with the function of the pottery, were invaluable. He also kindly agreed to publish two of the Sabi Abyad cuneiform texts related to pottery in this thesis (Appendix F), and has compiled the list of Middle Assyrian pottery names in Chapter VI. Frans has the rare ability to step over the boundaries of his field and interest archaeologists for the many jewels hidden behind all those tiny cuneiform signs. Ans Bulles corrected the English text.

Although the possibility to lock myself up with a full year of sabbatical time ahead of me was pure luxury, it has been healthy to stay in touch with archaeologist friends and discuss pottery and other subjects. Olivier Nieuwenhuyse, Lidewijde de Jong, Karin Bartl, Markus Gschwind, Verena Daiber, Heike Dohmann-Pfalzner and many others have contributed a lot in various ways. The thesis was finished in Damascus at a time when both my private and professional life were taking new directions. It feels therefore as if the thesis is the icing on the cake of living in Syria. The many friends, Syrian, Dutch and foreign, who made my stay in the magical city of Damascus such a wonderful time, must be thanked here as well. My parents and sister, who have always supported me whatever strange direction my life took, and my family and friends in the Netherlands have been more a part of this work than they imagine.

At the end of this long list of friends and colleagues stands Ivar Nijenhuis. Thank you for putting up with a “sherd-nerd”, for keeping me sane and well-fed, for encouraging me to continue and for keeping me from working too much. Your contribution to this thesis cannot be expressed in words. You are a true companion.

Damascus / Cairo
Kim Duistermaat