

12

Notes On The Late Prehistoric Pottery of Mesopotamia

by

Behnam Abu Al-Soof, Ph.D.

Director of Archaeological Exploration

I. The latest prehistoric periods in Mesopotamia, which began about 3500 B.C. and lasted nearly Seven Centuries derive their names from the two sites where their existence was first revealed: Warka in the heart of the southern Mesopotamian plain¹, and Jamdat Nasr to the north in Akkad².

During the season of 1931-32 at Warka, the German expedition identified eighteen layers under the Ziggurat within the E-anna precinct, sixteen of which were prehistoric levels (XVIII-III), eleven of them attributed to the epoch under discussion. The so-called Uruk period was defined by the appearance of new types of pottery, the use of the true potter's wheel, and innovations in architecture, glyptic and metal-work³.

Further north at Jamdat-Nasr, E. Mackay unearthed in 1926 a new type of polychrome pottery, associated with tablets bearing inscription.⁴ Many features of this painted pottery, however, are known to be reminiscent of the preceding Uruk wares. Attempts have been made to divide the Uruk period into two distinct phases with Warka VI, which produced new features and new forms of pottery, as the turning point.⁵ Traces of the earliest temple building in riemchen bricks cone mosaic ornament and the first use of cylinder seals in Warka VI led S. Lloyd to the following division:

Warka XIV-VII "Early Uruk".

Warka VI-III "Late Uruk".

But the terms "Uruk" and "Jamdat

(1) In the Qadisya district c. 18 km. to the east of the railways station at al-Darraji and about 30 km. to the east of the town of es-Samawa.

(2) Fifteen miles north east of Kish in Babylon district.

(3) Cf. UVB IV, 1932 pp. 6 and 31. Num-

bering from the top, levels I and II were attributed to the Early Dynastic period.

(4) Mackay, Ernest: Chicago, 1931, "Report on Excavations at Jemdat Nasr, Iraq". Field Museum — Oxford University joint expedition; A. Parrot: 1960, p. 6.

(5) *Sumer*, Vol. IV No. 1, 1948, p. 50.

Nasr'' as used in the Warka report were adopted by P. Van Der Meer:

Warka XIV-V ''Uruk''.

Warka IV-III ''Jamdat Nasr''⁶.

Under another system of nomenclature, the later part of the period was termed ''Protoliterate'', with Warka VII as its starting point.⁷

Delougaz who conceived the term, attributed to it four distinct phases: a, b, c and d, with the invention of writing occurring in Protoliterate a.

In a more recent study Le Breton adopted both system, employing early and late Uruk as well as Protoliterate:

Warka (E-anna) XIV-XII ''Early Uruk''

Warka (E-anna) VIII-VII ''Transitional''.

Warka (E-anna) VI-IV ''Late Uruk''.

Then following the Warka report in dividing level IV into two parts A and B, he attributed part of IV A and part of III to Protoliterate ''C''; and part of III and II to Protoliterate ''d''. The Jamdat Nasr phase according to Le Breton, covers part of late Uruk (IV A and B) and the two Protoliterate phases ''C'' and ''d''.⁸ For purposes of ceramic studies, however, the present writer has chosen to use the less controversial terms early and late Uruk, also employing such terms as Uruk and Jamdat Nasr wares to describe particular types of pottery. The terms Uruk period, Jamdat Nasr period, protoliterate and Ninevite V periods are used when it is found necessary.

II. Uruk pottery is found throughout Mesopotamia, from Susa and Sialk in the east, Diyarbekir to the north, to the west along the Khabur and Balikh rivers, in the 'Amuq, and even as far as Egypt. This distribution would suggest Mesopotamia as the focal point; all the available evidence, however supports the view that Uruk pottery and in fact the Uruk Culture in general is a local Mesopotamian development. There are far more known Uruk sites in northern Mesopotamia than in the south. It is not possible at present to tell whether or not this fact is significant, as the existing southern surveys are far from complete. Moreover, in the south there is the added problem of silting and subsidence which would have tended to obliterate sites, in particular small ones, of Uruk and earlier dates. Where extensive surface surveys have been carried out, however, for example in the Diyala, Nippur, Eridu and Warka regions, a number of Uruk sites have been found. In spite of the smaller numbers of recorded sites, one's inclination is to treat the south as the focal area at this time owing to the social and urban development which is known to have taken place there, and for which as yet we have no parallels in the north. Only further excavation in the north and further survey in the south can satisfactorily resolve these problems, however.

III. With the exception of Gawra, which lacks some of the typical Uruk shapes, for example bevelled rim bowls, handled cups, drooping spouts and squat four-lugged jars, the similarity between Uruk pottery in northern and southern Mesopotamia is immediately apparent.

(6) Cf. ''The Ancient chronology of Western Asia and Egypt'', Leiden E.S. Brill, 1947, Table I.

(7) Cf. ''Pre-Sargonic Temples in the Diyala Region'', 1942 (OIP LVIII) p. 8, n. 10. Nevertheless Perkins prefers to open the period with Warka E-anna VIII; cf. SAOC No. 25, p. 97, No. 1.

(8) Iraq, Vol. XIX, No. 2, 1957, p. 174; for more recent work on the subject cf. Edith Porada, in *Chronology in Old World Archaeology*, ed. R.W. Erich, Chicago 1965, pp. 133-34 and charts on p. 175; also cf. Robert McC. Adams and Hans J. Nissen in ''The Uruk Countryside'', Chicago 1972, pp. 97-104.

Red and grey wares are present at all sites in both areas, and the plain buff variety, although predominant in the south, is also present everywhere at northern sites. There are a large number of shapes common to both districts: open bowls, bevelled rim bowls, "flower pots", sinuous-sided bowls, globular cooking pots, spouted and unspouted jars, jars with multiple soputs (Telloh, Jamdat Nasr, Khafajah, and Qarashina), squat four-lugged jars, shallow bowls with knobbed tripod bases (Warka XIV and XII, Qalinj Agha VI, and Gawra, in the trench). On the bases of all these similarities, the writer prefers the term Uruk in describing the post-'Ubaid and pre-Ninevite V pottery found everywhere in the north rather than "Gawra", a term adopted by Perkins for the northern Uruk wares (SAOC, No. 25, pp. 194-97, and 199). The use of the former term reflects more accurately both the continuity of pottery types in this area, and, allowing for local variations which are always present; the general uniformity of the pottery types of this period.

IV. That there was no break in ceramic tradition between the late 'Ubaid and early Uruk periods is demonstrated by the existence of late 'Ubaid pottery in Uruk context at Warka, Ur, Telloh, and Qalinj Agha, also by the presence of the Uruk grey and red wares in 'Ubaid levels at a number of sites in northern and southern Mesopotamia. The so-called 'Ubaid II ceramic, which appeared at Telloh and in Warka XII, continuing into VII, and perhaps in scattered examples as late as Warka III, is certainly Uruk in date. This late variety of painted pottery is wheel-turned, whereas the normal 'Ubaid painted ware is either hand-made or, towards the end of the period, made on a slow wheel. Moreover, the entire upper surface of such vessels was often decorated, usually in geometric designs, with both red and black paint. A fragment from Warka also showed a

crudely drawn fish or pig. The painted technique applied here appears to have been a revival of the old 'Ubaid tradition. At Ur Woolley's Ur-'Ubaid III graves are certainly later than the true 'Ubaid period. They represent perhaps a transitional stage between 'Ubaid and Uruk, or very early Uruk material. What is important is the complete mixture of Uruk and 'Ubaid types found in these graves, and the persistence of monochrome painted decoration, albeit in a very simplified form, on wheel-made pottery. Pottery shapes such as spouted jars, jars with basket handles, and squat four-lugged jars, known among the painted al-'Ubaid pottery, all continued into Uruk period. Prominent among the examples of grey and red Uruk pottery occurring in 'Ubaid levels are: the group of fragments, in both wares, found in Warka XVIII-XV; the Eridu large squat red-slipped jar discovered in the Hut sounding, level XI, together with other examples found in Temples X-IX at Eridu. "Sprig-ware" demonstrates a combination of 'Ubaid-like painted ornament on red-slipped pottery, occurring in the transitional period between 'Ubaid and Uruk at Gawra (levels XII A-XII), in the upper part of Susa A, and at Brak. Continuity in ceramic tradition is also attested towards the end of the Uruk period between late Uruk and the so-called Jamdat Nasr period. Together with the Jamdat Nasr painted pottery there occurred, in many places in Babylonia, a large number of Uruk types. Squat four-lugged jars together with spouted and unspouted late Uruk jars are also found in the painted Jamdat Nasr style. This unbroken sequence of ceramic tradition from 'Ubaid to Uruk and Jamdat Nasr wares suggests strongly a gradual development and cultural continuity; there is simply no opportunity for the overwhelming invasion of new people that is often proposed.

V. It is true that black, grey, and red pottery was at home in Anatolia from the Neolithic onwards, but this does not seem to have influenced the Mesopotamian red and grey varieties, the shapes being entirely different. Red and grey pottery was known in Mesopotamia during the six millennium B.C. at the beginning of the Hassuna period (Tell es-Sawwan II). Grey and black burnished wares were also present in Hassuna IV and V. On the basis of clay texture, technique of firing, and shape, these early Mesopotamian occurrences are thought to be a local Hassuna product, achieved perhaps through an accident of firing, but possibly manufactured deliberately.

In Mesopotamia these wares soon went out of fashion and were absent for nearly 2000 years; but they reappeared towards the end of the 'Ubaid period, in both northern and southern Mesopotamia, and by the beginning of the Uruk period had become popular. It has been suggested that Anatolia was the origin of these Mesopotamian wares, in particular the grey variety, but the Mesopotamian Uruk shapes are entirely foreign in Asia Minor. Moreover, areas peripheral to Anatolia, for example north Syria and southeastern Turkey produced virtually no grey and red Uruk wares while there is visible a strong Mesopotamian influence in the buff pottery at this time in, for example the 'Amuq and Diyarbekir, where the bevelled rim bowls, drooping spouts and reserved-slip ware were present. Nor can Iran be considered a possible source of the grey and red pottery. Similar pottery is found in the Susa region, but not elsewhere. This area is geographically an extension of the Mesopotamian plains and was often under Mesopotamian cultural influence. The grey ware of Hissar II is too late to have influenced the Mesopotamian grey Uruk; while neither the shape nor the technique of the red ware of

Bakun A V is related to the red Uruk ware in Mesopotamia. The small number of Iranian occurrences compared with the Mesopotamian ones indicate clearly that Iran was not the home of any of the Mesopotamian Uruk wares. One is thus forced to conclude that both the red and grey Uruk pottery were indigenous developments in Mesopotamia.

VI. On the basis of the pottery there would seem to be little reason for distinguishing the so-called Jamdat Nasr period as a separate culture. If anything, it would appear to be little more than a late phase of the Uruk period, and the painted Jamdat Nasr pottery may well have been no more than a luxury product of late Uruk date. A large number of Uruk types persist into the so-called Jamdat Nasr levels, for example bevelled rim bowls, "flower pot", handled cups, squat four-lugged jars, and spouted and unspouted jars. Moreover, among the Jamdat Nasr painted types are found a number of distinctive Uruk shapes, including the squat four-lugged jars together with spouted and unspouted late Uruk jars. The home of Jamdat Nasr pottery is undoubtedly Babylonia. There is some evidence, however, that it spread north by way of the Kirkuk plain. Three sites at Daquq in Kirkuk district (Tell el-Hajal, Rasm Baldagh, and Tell el-Mukhfiya) have produced some Jamdat Nasr pottery in the form of surface collections, and Jamdat Nasr pottery is said to have been found in the vicinity of Shemshara. Moreover, the scarlet ware of the Early Dynastic period, which is known in particular from the Diyala region, has also been found as surface material at Tell Ahmad el-Hatu in Kupri, half way between Kirkuk and Erbil. Its presence here is perhaps surprising, but the discovery of a very similar type in the excavations at Telul eth-Thalathat suggests that the influence and distribution of this distinctive type of painted pottery may be far wider than

had previously been thought. This is a fragment of a large jar painted in a reddish colour on a buff surface, with a design consisting of stylized ox-like animals with birds perched on their backs (cf. pl. I; found in association with Ninevite V pottery in the upper levels at Tell V during the fourth season). In shape it is reminiscent of the large Jamdat Nasr polychrome jars, but in technique and style it is remarkably like the scarlet ware from the Diyala. The actual paint colour is darker, but is much closer to the scarlet colour employed in the Diyala than to the plum red pigment used by Jamdat Nasr potters.

Outside Mesopotamia, however, the influence of the painted Jamdat Nasr style reached Susa C b in the form of a squat jar with a combination of lugs and handle. Susa Cc yielded another squat jar, with a combination of lugs, handle, and a false spout. Pottery with monochrome decoration found in Susa Ca-c and Sialk III 7b, for the most part trough-spouted jugs, resembles Jamdat Nasr types from Telloh. Sialk III 7b also yielded a bird vase reminiscent of an example found in Protoliterate c context in the Diyala. Late Uruk-Jamdat Nasr influence in both pottery and other material culture also reached northern Syria, southeastern Turkey, and as far as the Nile valley, where a painted jars in the Jamdat Nasr geometric style, and pear-shaped jars, either red-slipped, red-washed or buff, occurred during the late Gerzean period.

VII. That the plain and incised Ninevite V pottery is a natural development from the preceding Uruk wares cannot be disputed. The elegantly formed shapes and the elaborate incised technique applied to them are a natural advance in the potter's craft, especially under the influence of metal forms and the development of the fast potter's wheel. In unquestionably early Uruk levels at Qalinj Agha (levels III-VI in sounding I; cf.

Sumer Vol. XXII, 1966, pp. 77-82), a considerable number of fragments of a very thin greenish-buff ware are present. These belonged to hemispherical bowls with small beaded rims, always wheel-turned. In both shape and technique, these fragments are strikingly reminiscent of Ninevite V pottery. Moreover, Ninevite V wares, including the painted variety, at both excavated and surveyed sites, are almost always found in association with Uruk pottery.

This is true at such excavated sites as: Nineveh, Gawra, Ibrahim Bayis, the Dokan, Telul eth-Thalathat, and Grai Resh. It is also true at nearly one hundred surveyed sites in Assyria.

With the painted Ninevite V ware, however, the situation may be slightly different. Direct local uncedent for this painted variety can not be found; instead there is some resemblance in decoration and style of painting between the Mesopotamian painted Ninevite V ware and some painted chalices and stemmed bowls of Sialk III 6-7 and IV, Hissar I A-C and II A. On this basis the Iranian origin of the painted Ninevite V pottery has been argued, and infiltration by way of the lesser Zab has been suggested. The writer's reluctance to accept this hypothesis is based on two things: first, that shapes such as rounded-bottomed bowls with beaded or straight rims, carinated stemmed jars with trumpet-shaped mouths and pierced lugs on the shoulders, and large stemmed ring-based jars with nearly ovoid bodies are, so far as we know, absent in Iran. These shapes occur in Assyria not only in the Ninevite V painted pottery but also in both the incised and plain Ninevite V wares. Moreover, the chalice shape which is always linked with Iran, has possible antecedents in Assyria itself, in the chalices of the Uruk period, found in Gawra XI-IX and Grai Resh IV-II. Stone and pottery chalices are known as early as the Halaf period. In the se-

cond place the majority of both excavated and surveyed sites with painted Ninevite V pottery are clustered in the plains of Mosul and Erbil, and to a lesser extent in the foot hill country to the east and north. In Mosul district alone there are more than 25 sites which have produced painted Ninevite V surface material. It is also important that the Ninevite V painted ware, and for that matter all Ninevite V wares, are virtually absent in areas adjacent to Iran. One site only was recorded in the Diyala district (Telul el-Hadid, near the Persian border in the Qadha of Khanaqin), and no more than five, further north, in Sulaimaniya district (in both Dokan and Shahrzur areas). In Iran itself there have been found as yet only a very small number of sites with painted pottery which is reminiscent of Ninevite V.

It should also be pointed out that there is at least a suspicion that the painted Ninevite V does not necessarily

occur on all Ninevite V sites. In Mosul district it was recorded at about fifty per cent of the Ninevite V sites surveyed, and west of the Tigris the percentage is even lower. This may of course reflect simply the relative rarity of the painted ware and not its total absence; certainly the incised ware is the more common of the two types. It is also possible that the painted ware may be slightly earlier in date than the incised ware, but the Japanese excavations at Telul eth-Thalathat seem to have found the two varieties more or less contemporary. Bearing all this evidence in mind, one can perhaps conclude that, although the impetus for the Ninevite V painted pottery may have come from Iran, there remains a very strong possibility that it was a local northern Mesopotamian development. There is no doubt that other Ninevite V wares are purely local in origin, and the fine grey wares persist throughout the third and into the second millennium.

