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The pots and potters of Assyria : technology and organization of production, ceramics sequence and vessel function at Late Bronze Age Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

“... die Gebrauchskeramik der mittanischen und mittelassyrischen Zeit [gilt] als eine der “langweiligsten” [...] aus dem Alten Orient...”
Peter Pfälzner (1995: 1)

This book aims to be an extensive presentation of the ceramics from Late Bronze Age Tell Sabi Abyad, Syria. Not only shall I present a formal description of the ceramics, but I will also make an attempt at a reconstruction of production processes and organization, and the function and use of ceramics at the site. In order to put the story of pottery at Sabi Abyad in the proper perspective it is useful to summarize the setting of the site and the historical backgrounds of the period. Also, I shall sketch the general organization and character of the settlement at Sabi Abyad and the region in general. A short account of previous work on the topic and a presentation of the research aims and questions of this thesis conclude the chapter.

I.1 The site of Tell Sabi Abyad

Tell Sabi Abyad I is a 5-hectare site in Northern Syria, and the largest of a group of four separate small tells (Sabi Abyad I-IV). This study only deals with the remains from Sabi Abyad I. The site is situated along the Balikh River, a small perennial stream that runs south from the plains of Urfa in Southern Turkey towards Raqqa on the Euphrates in Syria (fig. I.1). The climate in this region is semi-arid. The current 250 mm isohyet runs east-west approximately halfway the valley, about 25 km south of Sabi Abyad. In this steppe-like landscape rain-fed agriculture is practicable in the north, while in the southern part of the valley rain-fed agriculture is risky and irrigation is necessary on fields located away from the river. Sabi Abyad is therefore located at the edge of the dry-farming zone. In the Bronze Age, small canals perhaps led from the main river channel to the fields of settlements. However, major irrigation canals have not yet been attested before the end of the first millennium BC (Wilkinson 1998a, b). The Balikh Valley was inhabited more or less densely throughout the ages. Survey evidence¹ seems to indicate that during the first half of the Late Bronze Age (i.e. the 15th and 14th centuries BC), a shift in settlement took place away from the nucleated centres of the Middle Bronze Age into smaller, often newly founded rural settlements, pointing to renewed agricultural exploitation of marginal areas (fig. I.2a, Wilkinson 1998b: 72, 80). Middle Assyrian settlement (in the second half of the Late Bronze Age, from the 13th century BC onwards) in the valley seems to have followed a period of abandonment of settlements in the middle of the Late Bronze Age (fig. I.2b). It seems that the Assyrian colonization of the Balikh took place near the southern limit of dry-farming, in a virtual vacuum without any sedentary power structures or previously existing claims of land ownership. However, survey evidence does not give us any information on the presence of indigenous settled or nomadic inhabitants at this time (Lyon 2000: 101, 104), since their material culture has either not been recognized or been dated much earlier.

Sabi Abyad was first inhabited in the Late Neolithic period (Akkermans 1996; Akkermans et al. 2006). After the site had been deserted around 5800 cal BC, it was again occupied in the Late Bronze Age. The earliest Late Bronze Age remains consist of a square tower-like building, surrounded by structures of an as yet poorly-known nature. Most probably this tower has to be dated to the 14th or beginning of the 13th century BC (see also Chapter IV). At the end of the 13th century BC, and after a period of abandonment, the first tower was restored and used again, and a Middle Assyrian *dunnu* settlement was built (see below for a more elaborate description of *dunnu*s). The occupation probably lasted till the late 12th century BC and measured approximately 1 ha on average. After the *dunnu* had been abandoned, a house or farm probably dating from the Hellenistic/Seleucid

¹ Archaeological surveys in the Balikh Valley were carried out by P.M.M.G. Akkermans in 1983 (Akkermans 1984), T. Wilkinson in 1992 - 1995 (1996; 1998a and b) and J. Lyon in 1995 (Lyon 2000). See also Curvers 1991. A survey of the area west of the Balikh Valley including the wadi Qaramokh was carried out by B. Einwag (1993/4, Einwag and Otto in prep.). For a survey around Raqqa, see Kohlmeyer 1984.

period (Duistermaat and De Jong in prep.) was built on the summit. An Islamic graveyard probably dating from the 17-18th century AD represents the latest occupation of the site (Akkermans in prep.).

Archaeological research at Sabi Abyad was started in 1986. Work initially focussed on the prehistoric occupation. Since 1991, however, a large part of the excavation and research efforts is also devoted to the Late Bronze Age remains. The complete exposure of one or more building levels was one of the objectives, thereby providing ample opportunity for internal spatial analyses and analyses of the functions and roles of the site and settlement, both on a local and a regional level (Akkermans 1997, in press; Akkermans and Duistermaat 2001; Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990; Akkermans and Wiggermann 1999, in press; Akkermans et al. 1993; Rossmesl 1989).

I.2 The Late Bronze Age settlement

Historical background

In the 14th to the early 12th centuries BC the population of the Balikh valley witnessed important and far-reaching political changes. In this period the Assyrian state expanded its territory greatly, and eventually turned the area into an integral part of the Assyrian empire. Recent research in Middle Assyrian provincial settlements like Tell Sabi Abyad and Tell Sheikh Hamad/*Dur Katlimmu* has added a wealth of information to our knowledge of historical developments in Northern Syria in the 13th century. The situation in the 14th century, however, remains less well known. The Middle Assyrian occupation at Sabi Abyad dates from the late 13th and 12th centuries BC. However, to provide a background to the Middle Assyrian occupation of the site this summary of the history of the area will extend both into the 14th century and into the 11th century BC.

In the early 14th century BC the Balikh valley was part of the state of Mitanni/Ḫanigalbat. This kingdom consisted of tribes and city-states, and stretched from the Tigris to the region of Aleppo. The centre of government was located in the Khabur triangle, in the cities of Taidu (possibly Tell Hamidiya; Eichler et al. 1985: 53-70, Oates et al. 1997: 152, Röllig 1997: 282) and Waššukanni (perhaps Tell Fakhariya; Pruß and Bagdo 2002: 313). At the time the city of Aššur on the Tigris in present-day Iraq was a vassal of Ḫanigalbat, paying regular tribute. We hardly know anything about the political situation in the Balikh Valley at this time (Harrak 1987: 1-2; Jakob 2003: 5).

After King Aššur-uballiṭ I (1353-1318 BC) had acceded to the Assyrian throne, the position of Assyria towards Ḫanigalbat began to change. King Shutarna III of Ḫanigalbat strengthened his ties with the Assyrians and relieved them of paying tribute. He moreover planned to murder his rival to the throne, Shattiwazza. The latter took refuge in Ḫatti and signed a treaty with the Hittite King Shuppiluliuma. In this treaty the cities on the banks of the Euphrates up to the confluence with the Balikh belonged to Carchemish and Ḫatti, while Mitanni/Ḫanigalbat was reduced to the Balikh and Khabur valleys. Shattiwazza and the king of Carchemish, Piyashshili, then set out to re-conquer Ḫanigalbat from Shutarna. The Assyrian troops came to the help of their ally Shutarna only when the Hittite troops had already reached Taidu. In the following years there were several confrontations between the Assyrians and the Hittites in Ḫanigalbat. After a battle between Ḫatti and Aššur at Carchemish, under the reign of Murshili II, there is no information of further Assyrian military campaigns in Ḫanigalbat. The expansion of Assyrian territory under Aššur-uballiṭ probably did not reach far beyond the Assyrian heartland (Harrak 1987: 31-58; Jakob 2003: 6). In the Balikh Valley, the situation may have been rather unstable, which perhaps accounts for the abandonment of the towns in this period.

We know little about Assyrian activities in Ḫanigalbat during the reigns of Enlil-narari I (1318 – 1308 BC) and Arik-den-ili (1307 - 1295 BC). Instead, they seem to have concentrated on problems with Babylonia. Ḫanigalbat seems to have been a rather independent state, probably paying tribute to Ḫatti (Harrak 1987: 59-60).

Starting with the reign of Adad-narari I (1295-1264 BC), the Assyrians tried to take immediate control of the lands of Ḫanigalbat for the first time. Shutarna's successor Shattuara

undertook several aggressive actions towards the Assyrians, probably by attacking Assyrian traders or plundering Assyrian border towns. Adad-narari, around 1285-80 BC, attacked Ḫanigalbat and brought Shattuara to Aššur. He forced him to pay tribute to Assyria “for as long as he lived”. However, Shattuara was allowed to remain king of Ḫanigalbat. His land was now a vassal state of Assyria. The Hittites, too, seem to have acknowledged the Assyrian power over Ḫanigalbat. After some years the situation changed again. Shattuara’s son Wasashatta revolted against the Assyrians when he came to power, and asked the Hittites for their support. This was reason enough for Adad-narari to undertake a second major campaign in Ḫanigalbat (around 1275-70 BC). This time, however, he took numerous cities and destroyed them. He deported the royal family of Ḫanigalbat to Aššur (but perhaps Wasashatta escaped). The cities that were taken by Adad-narari all seem to be located in the upper Khabur Valley and the northern range of the Balikh Valley up to Carchemish. After this major military success, Adad-narari addressed the Hittite king on a basis of equality, naming himself Great King and “brother” to the Hittite king. Hattushili III, however, reacted furiously to these Assyrian actions and seems not to have accepted the new status of the Assyrian king. After the campaign, Adad-narari began to set up Assyrian administration in Ḫanigalbat. He had a new palace built in Taidu, for example. It is not clear, however, whether Assyrian governors were installed in Ḫanigalbat and what the nature and duration of Adad-narari’s control over the newly conquered lands was. Until now, archaeological excavations have not yielded any traces of an active Assyrian administration in the Balikh Valley in the days of Adad-narari. It is possible that Ḫanigalbat regained some of its independence towards the end of Adad-narari’s reign (Harrak 1987: 98-131; Jakob 2003: 8).

There is no textual information for the first half of the Late Bronze Age pertaining to the Balikh Valley, and the local history can only be constructed on the basis of survey data. Sites with occupation from this period in the Balikh valley are Harran, Tell Hammam et-Turkman, Tell es-Semen, Tell Jittal, Tell Sahlan, and a large number of smaller villages and hamlets (Balikh VIII A period, see Curvers 1991), a total of 41 sites (as compared to around 13 sites for the Middle Assyrian period; fig. I.2a; Lyon 2000: 99, 100). Balikh VIII A remains have been excavated at Tell Hammam et-Turkman only, and include a large building identified as a palace by the excavators. The building consists of a cobbled courtyard, doors fitted with stone orthostats, and rooms organized in an official and a domestic wing. The palace was left unhurriedly, rooms were emptied carefully and doors were closed off before abandonment, as if the inhabitants planned to return, but never got the chance (Meijer 1988: 88-91). The *dimtu* building of level 7 at Sabi Abyad should most probably be dated to these unstable times as well (see Chapters III and IV).

From the reign of Shalmaneser I (1263-1234 BC) onwards more information about the situation in the area of Ḫanigalbat is available from cuneiform sources. Not only from the Assyrian royal inscriptions and texts from the capital Aššur, but now also from texts found in Assyrian settlements in Ḫanigalbat themselves. At the beginning of Shalmaneser’s reign Wasashatta’s successor Shattuara II, called “king of Ḫanigalbat”, revolted against the Assyrian dominance and tried to regain power in his land with the help of the Hittites and the *Ahlamu*-nomads. Shalmaneser collected his troops and struck back, gaining a major victory over the Ḫanigalbateans and the Hittite army. This time the Assyrian troops reached the whole of the western Jezira, including Tell Sheikh Hamad and the confluence of Khabur and Euphrates, Carchemish and the eastern bank of the Euphrates. The relations with the Hittites seemed to have deteriorated, and Hattushili did not write to Shalmaneser or acknowledge his new position as Great King. When Tudhaliya IV acceded to the Hittite throne the relations relaxed somewhat, although there was a major clash between him and Shalmaneser in Nihriia north of Taidu. It is not clear whether a treaty was signed after Shalmaneser’s victory in Nihriia, but relations improved and Tudhaliya actually acknowledged Shalmaneser as Great King. Shalmaneser was probably the first to establish actual Assyrian administrative control over the territory of Ḫanigalbat (Harrak 1987: 155-205; cf. also Heinhold-Krahmer 1988 for a discussion of the durability of Shalmaneser’s victory and the suggestion that the control over the area west of the Khabur was not very stable during Shalmaneser’s reign). The Assyrians seem to have largely adopted the Mitanni system of agricultural administration through *dunnu* settlements (*dimtu* in Mitanni), and a certain

cultural continuity is also visible in material remains like ceramics (see chapter IV). A number of palaces and administrative centres were built in different parts of the area, populated by Assyrian officials. These centres had a variety of tasks, all carried out on the orders of the royal palace in Aššur through various officials. They took care of agricultural production, but also of tax collection, distribution, control, etc. However, Harrak suggests that we must not speak of Ḫanigalbat as an Assyrian province at this time, but that we should see the Assyrian settlements as colonies in otherwise foreign lands (Harrak 1987: 190-205).

The Assyrian hold over Ḫanigalbat was strengthened and consolidated when Tukulti-Ninurta I (1233-1197 BC) came into power. Although there were several clashes with Ḫatti and the king had to undertake a military campaign against conspiring Hurrian lands that bordered Ḫanigalbat to the north, the central area of Ḫanigalbat seems to have been under firm and peaceful control. Tukulti-Ninurta expanded the Assyrian empire to the north and north-east. He also took control over Babylonia by defeating the Kassite king Kashtiliash (Harrak 1987: 230-274). The Middle Assyrian kingdom reached its apex under this king. There is a wealth of information on the administration of Ḫanigalbat from cuneiform texts, from Aššur, Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and Hattushas as well as from many sites in Ḫanigalbat itself such as Dur-Katlimmu, Tell Chuera and Tell Sabi Abyad. In Ḫanigalbat Tukulti-Ninurta seems to have continued the administration policies adopted by his father. Ḫanigalbat is now a regular province, and although the grand vizier carries the title of “king of Ḫanigalbat” the area is not autonomous anymore. The western border is probably located somewhere between the Balikh and Euphrates Rivers. The area was the main source of grain and agricultural products, and was ruled by Assyrian officials who were members of the royal family, in local Assyrian palaces and agricultural estates (*dunnu*). The Middle Assyrian *dunnu* at Sabi Abyad (level 6) was founded at the beginning of his reign (see also chapter IV). The local Hurrian population had little administrative or other power, and was exploited to work for the Assyrian state. Internal dynastic problems and unrest ended the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I. His son and the nobles of Assyria took the king prisoner in Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta and killed him in 1197 BC (Harrak 1987: 267-274; Jakob 2003: 9).

After the death of Tukulti-Ninurta, the Assyrian administration of Ḫanigalbat continued under his successors Aššur-nadin-apli (1196-1194 BC), Aššur-narari III (1193-1188 BC) and Enlil-kudurri-ušur (1187-1183) (Harrak 1987: 275-277). This is the best-documented period in the administration of Tell Sabi Abyad, when Ilī-padâ is Grand Vizier, King of Ḫanigalbat and owner of the *dunnu* settlement at the site until his death around 1185 BC (level 5; Wiggermann 2000; Wiggermann in prep.; Akkermans and Wiggermann in press). Information on the historical background of Assyria is, however, scarce. Nevertheless, the Middle Assyrian settlement at Sabi Abyad proves that the area up to the Balikh was still firmly held by the Assyrians (contra Jakob 2003: 11).

When Ninurta-apil-Ekur (1182-1170 BC), son of Ilī-padâ, seized the throne of Aššur, the title “King of Ḫanigalbat” seems to have disappeared. The Middle Assyrian settlement at Sabi Abyad did continue after 1182 (levels 4 and 3), but its relation to the Middle Assyrian administration becomes less clear. There is not a lot of historical information about the western province in the twelfth century. Middle Assyrian occupation continues in the Khabur region during the reign of Tiglatpileser I (1114-1076 BC), at the sites of Tell Bderi (*Dur Aššur-ketti-lešer*), Tell Taban (*Tabetu*), Tell Barri (*Kahat*) and Tell Brak (Pfälzner 1995: 114, 225-226; Ohnuma et al. 1998, 2000; Ohnuma and Numoto 2001). The recent finds of administrative texts from Giricano Höyük in south-eastern Turkey (dating from 1069/68 BC, Radner 2004; Schachner 2002, 2003) prove that the Middle Assyrian *dunnu* system for administrating agricultural lands was kept up in the north at least into the reign of Aššur-bel-kala (1073-1056), although perhaps on a smaller, more private, scale (or under local dynasties linking themselves to the Assyrians, cf. Masetti-Rouault 1998: 235). At some point the Assyrians lost their hegemony over the Balikh Valley and other parts of the Middle Assyrian kingdom to the Aramean tribes and city-states, until the 9th century and the emergence of the Neo-Assyrian empire. The reasons for the supposed collapse are still poorly understood, as are its size and impact. Equally, it is not certain whether or not it was connected with the increasing exploitation of the indigenous agricultural population and increasing pressure on marginal lands that formally were the realm of nomadic groups,

and whether the dominance of local nomadic groups should be seen as the cause or rather as the outcome of this decline (cf. the contributions in Ward and Sharp Joukowsky 1992; McClellan 1992; Masetti-Rouault 1998). But by the early Iron Age the concept of *dunnu* administration of agricultural land had disappeared (Radner 2004: 70).

The Middle Assyrian administration of the provinces

Possibly in the days of King Shalmaneser, but definitely during the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I, the Khabur and Balikh valleys were an integrated part of the Assyrian kingdom. The western province of Ḫanigalbat was administered by the highest official in the Assyrian hierarchy: the grand vizier (*sukallu rabû*). The grand vizier was second only to the king, and at the time when Sabi Abyad was occupied the grand viziers were relatives of the king and belonged to the royal family (Wiggermann 2000: 171; Jakob 2003: 23). To underline the important position of these grand viziers, and perhaps to ease the domination over the indigenous population of the western province, at least three of the grand viziers also carried the title “King of Ḫanigalbat” (*šar māt Hanigalbat*): they were Qibi-Aššur (a nephew of King Shalmaneser), his son Aššur-Iddin and his grandson Ilī-padâ. So, although Ḫanigalbat as a sovereign entity had ceased to exist, its unity and special position continued to be acknowledged. The title “King of Ḫanigalbat” appears no longer in texts anymore after Ninurta-apil-Ekur became King of Assyria in 1182 BC (Wiggermann 2000: 171).

The Assyrians administered the western province mainly for the agricultural income it yielded, but also for the position it occupied as a border region towards the neighbouring peoples and as a passage for trade routes with the west. The lands of Ḫanigalbat were part of the royal estate, as all land was, while part of it was granted to high-ranking officials for private exploitation (Wiggermann 2000: 173; for the distinction between public and private in this period, see Schloen 2001: 298-301). Apart from the grand vizier, there were also viziers (*sukallu*) responsible for parts of Ḫanigalbat. Villages and cities (*ālu*) were managed by a *hazi'anu* or mayor, who was responsible to the *bel pahete* or governor in his district capital (Jakob 2003: 14). High officials often administrated their land in the form of *dunnu* settlements, private agricultural estates in the countryside used for the extraction of agricultural products and surplus to support the activities of the official in Aššur or his city residence elsewhere. *Dunnus* could also have duties in border control, taxing and military action. A *dunnu* was managed by an *abarakku* or *abarakku rabû*, a steward or chief steward, who was responsible either to the owner of the *dunnu* or to the city under whose jurisdiction it fell (Wiggermann 2000: 172-3). *Dunnu* settlements were probably similar to the earlier *dimtu* settlements of the Mitanni period, and perhaps administrated on comparable principles (Koliński 2001). A *dimtu* or *dunnu* generally consisted of a wall with a gate, a courtyard, official and domestic buildings, grain storage, fields, gardens, a well, a threshing floor, stables, etc. (Koliński 2001, Wiggermann 2000: 172).

The work at the farms and in the towns was done with the help of “ten-men” (*rab ešarte*) and chief farmers (*rab ikkarāte*). They coordinated the work of farmers and craftsmen. *Šiluhlu* workers (mostly farmers but also craftsmen) were unfree workers who did not own any private land but received rations for their work (Jakob 2003: 39). Among these people were local Šubareans and people deported from other parts of the kingdom (Wiggermann 2000). During the Middle Assyrian administration of the provinces the local, Šubarean population lost its power completely and hardly played a role in the administration. The class of free workers included officials, temple functionaries and craftsmen. In remuneration for their work they received a plot of land for their sustenance. They were obliged to provide *ilku*-service, consisting of either a part of the profit of their land or services rendered to their lord (military service, for example) (Jakob 2003: 34-35). The payment of a “salary” is rarely attested in Middle Assyrian sources (Jakob 2003: 51). War hostages and slaves came at the bottom of the hierarchy (Jakob 2003: 41, 43-47).

The dunnu of Tell Sabi Abyad and its role in the Balikh Valley

The settlement at Sabi Abyad was a *dunnu*. Whether the first tower-like building at Sabi Abyad (level 7) was already a *dunnu* or *dimtu* remains to be investigated (cf. Koliński 2001: 60-61). But it is clear that from level 6 onwards the Middle Assyrian occupation was a planned and highly structured settlement, called a *dunnu* in the texts found at the site. Until 2006 approximately 400 cuneiform texts, envelopes and fragments have been found at the site (Akkermans and Wiggermann in press, Wiggermann in prep.), all of them related to the Assyrian administration of the *dunnu* and its surrounding lands. The different parts and functions of a *dunnu* can be reconstructed not only on the basis of textual evidence but also from the archaeological remains and the finds. In Chapter III a discussion of the architecture and stratigraphy will deal with the description of the *dunnu* as an architectural unit in more detail.

The *dunnu* at Sabi Abyad was the private property of Ilī-padâ, the grand vizier and king of Ḫanigalbat, and before him it was probably similarly the private property of his father Aššur-Iddin. The chief stewards at the *dunnu* were therefore directly responsible only to the highest official in the Assyrian kingdom. Between Aššur-Iddin and Ilī-padâ the *dunnu* at Sabi Abyad was briefly administrated by Šulmānu-mušabši, probably a member of the family. The ancient name of Sabi Abyad is as yet still unknown, although perhaps it simply was known as “the *dunnu*” (F.A.M. Wiggermann, pers. comm.). As is clear from the texts, farming was the main purpose of the *dunnu*. The total area of land, or catchment area, exploited by Sabi Abyad was probably around 3600 ha, including farmland for the *dunnu*, sustenance fields for its dependants, gardens, fallow land and pasture (Wiggermann 2000: 183). About 900 people were dependants of the *dunnu* administration. About 400 of them were so-called *šiluhlu* workers, usually with foreign names. They were agricultural workers, and rarely craftsmen. Another 440 or so belonged to the free-born *ālaju* villagers with Assyrian names, who received no rations but had their own sustenance fields to supply for their needs, in exchange for which they had to perform work for the *dunnu* (Wiggermann 2000: 174, 181). The administrative and domestic staff of the *dunnu* itself consisted of around 60 people², mostly Assyrians, living inside the *dunnu* complex. They were probably either *šiluhlu* or *ālaju*, while some of them may have been private landowners (Wiggermann 2000: 190-191). The domestic staff included specialists and artisans of various kinds, headed by the *abarakku* Mannu-ki-Adad, later Buriya and then Tammitte, and the “ten-men”. Professions that are attested in the texts include potters, brewers, oil-pressers, builders, leather-workers, bakers, perfume makers, hairdressers, singers, dressmakers, a smith, merchants, gardeners and shepherds, servants of the Temple of Aššur and scribes (Wiggermann 2000: 190). Next to farming, the *dunnu* also had tasks in border control, military support, control of caravans and collecting taxes. Trading and diplomatic contacts occurred not only with the home city of Aššur (and the unknown residence city of Ilī-padâ, Wiggermann 2000: 173), but also with Carchemish, Harran and faraway places like Sidon on the Mediterranean coast (Akkermans and Wiggermann 1999; Akkermans 1997).

Sabi Abyad was not the only Middle Assyrian settlement in the Balikh Valley (see fig. I.2b). The catchment area of Sabi Abyad probably included several (7?) subcentres or sub-*dunnus*, possibly including Tell Hammam et-Turkman, Khirbet es-Shenef and BS 161. The site of Tell Jittal was probably another larger *dunnu* and may be identified with the *Dunni-Dagal* from the texts (Wiggermann 2000: 184). Other Middle Assyrian sites identified by surveys include Tell Abyad (possibly *Dunni-Aššur?*), Tell Sahlan (*Sahlalu*) and Tell Abbara (BS-327). Five other sites have been identified as minor Middle Assyrian occupations, including Tell es-Semen, BS-106, BS-199, BS-200 and BS-296. Thus a total of 13 Middle Assyrian sites in the Balikh Valley south of the Turkish border were identified by archaeological fieldwork (Lyon 2000: 100), some of them founded on previously inhabited sites (like Sahlan) but many newly established. Northeast of Sabi Abyad and outside the Balikh Valley, the site of Tell Chuera (*Ḫarbe*) is another Middle Assyrian settlement. The Middle Assyrian occupation seems to be limited mainly to the northern part of the valley. To the south of Sabi Abyad the valley is practically deserted. Texts mention the existence of the sites of *Gilma* and

² However, in a personal communication on 23-12-2006 Wiggermann informed me that this estimate (which was mainly based on the size of the built area) probably is too high and should rather be around 30 staff and several soldiers or servants.

Serda (perhaps to be identified with Tell es-Seman and Abbara?) and *Tuttul* (Tell Bi'a near Raqqa) in the south, but no Middle Assyrian material has been found on the latter site (although the presence of an Assyrian governor here is clear from the Sabi Abyad texts; Wiggermann 2000: 171). Other *dunnu* known from the Sabi Abyad texts, and possibly belonging to the catchment area of Sabi Abyad, are *Dunnu-ša-Kidin-ilāni*, *Dunnu-ša-Urdi*, *Dunnu-ša-Buriya*³ and *Dunnu-ša-Šubrê* (the *dunnu* of the Šubareans). *Amimu* (not mentioned in the Sabi Abyad texts) and the cities of *Huzīrānu* and *Sāwanu* (possibly located north of the Turkish border?) should also be located in the area, but are still unidentified on the map (Wiggermann 2000: 205, Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996: 231 (index) and further discussion, Koliński 2001: 32). According to the names known from texts several other Middle Assyrian sites, including the larger city of Harran, should be located north of the modern Syro-Turkish border. So, apart from Sabi Abyad, there were several other *dunnu*s administrating part of the land in the Balikh Valley, for the benefit of high officials or cities. However, not all *dunnu*s functioned on the same level as the royal *dunnu* of Sabi Abyad.

Middle Assyrians and other local groups in the provinces

Although the Assyrians expanded their empire into the “empty” territory⁴ of the provinces in the 13th century BC, the texts from the capital and the provinces show that they were by no means the only people living in the area. “Empty” in this sense means that there may have been a political vacuum, only a few larger cities or permanent settlements or only few settled, organized populations claiming ownership of the land and opposing Assyrian dominance at the time of the Assyrian expansion. During the 13th and 12th centuries people from different tribes and ethnic backgrounds appear in the Assyrian texts as workers, deportees and hostages, couriers, traders or enemies. Their identity is either explicitly stated by the Assyrians or deduced by us from their personal (non-Assyrian) names. It is useful for this discussion on ceramic material culture to have at least a general understanding of their presence in the area and their relations to the Assyrians since often, albeit generally subconsciously, archaeologists tend to equal ceramic groups with cultural or ethnic groups (see also below).

The Hurrians (in Hittite), or rather Šubareans as the Assyrians called them (*šubri'u*), is a general term used by Assyrians for the people living outside the Assyrian core land, in Upper Mesopotamia or the lands of Šubartu. Whether Šubartu can be equalled with the land Ḫanigalbat that was conquered by Shalmaneser, or whether it is a generic name for all Hurrian lands including Ḫanigalbat is not completely clear (Heinhold-Krahmer 1988: 81-85). The question is outside the scope of this study. It does seem clear, however, that they are the indigenous, settled inhabitants of the territory incorporated in the Assyrian kingdom, including the Balikh Valley. Assyrian texts from Tell Chuera and Tell Sabi Abyad show that there were many contacts between Assyrians and Šubareans. At both sites Šubareans worked under Assyrian management in agriculture or in crafts, but also in positions with more responsibility, like a *rab ikkarāte* (chief farmer) or a courier (Jakob 2005). At Sabi Abyad, most of the unfree *šilublu* workers (agricultural workers and craftsmen) were of Šubarean descent, according to their names (Wiggermann 2000: 189). The Assyrians also did business with Šubareans living outside the scope of their administration, and they generally tried to maintain good relations with them (Jakob 2005: 182-183). The fact that military actions against Šubareans were sometimes still necessary (Heinhold-Krahmer 1988) and that Šubareans are also mentioned as hostages (Jakob 2005: 183) shows that these relations were not always as peaceful as the Assyrians would wish them to be. Šubareans were regularly subject to deportation from one part of the kingdom to an other, as is clear from the resettlement of Šubarean deportees near Kar-Tukulti-Ninurta (Freydank 1980) and from a text from Sabi Abyad mentioning Šubarean deportees from Shadikanni (Wiggermann 2000: 187). Deportation is a well-known tactic to break local organization and resistance (Masetti-Rouault 1998: 1). Near Sabi Abyad a number of Šubareans seem to have lived together in a separate location, called the “*dunnu* of the Šubareans” (Wiggermann 2000: 192). It is

³ Perhaps this is the *dunnu* of the same Buriya who acted as chief steward at Sabi Abyad for some years after (or replacing?) Mannu-ki-Adad (F.A.M. Wiggermann, personal communication 23-12-2006).

⁴ Survey evidence (see note 1) indicates that it is not only royal Assyrian rhetorics suggesting this picture.

very well possible, and even likely, that the Šubareans still (partly?) used and produced their own material culture (for example ceramics) and adhered to their own traditions, derived from their former Mitanni / Ḫanigalbatean customs and more or less different from the Middle Assyrian royal or state traditions. However, we have little information on this aspect from archaeology as we cannot yet define the more subtle nuances and differences in materials, styles and techniques (for example in the case of ceramics). It is as yet unclear what their influences on the Assyrian (material) culture may have been, or how Assyrian and Šubarean culture and traditions were already part of one larger whole even before Assyrian political dominance in Ḫanigalbat (Masetti-Rouault 1998: 225).

Suti'u is a term for the nomadic or semi-nomadic tribes roaming the steppes of Northern Mesopotamia. There are different groups of Suteans, who often worked together with the Assyrians. In Tell Chuera they delivered horses, and in Sabi Abyad a delegation of Suteans was received and treated to a meal and beer (Jakob 2005: 184; see also below in Chapter VI and Appendix F). Suteans also acted as messengers and informants for the Assyrians. The Suteans, like the Šubareans, had already lived in the area for a long time when the Assyrians took power, exploiting the steppe and the margins of the dry-farming zones. During Tukulti-Ninurta I's reign the relations with the nomads seem to have been good. But it has been suggested that the increasingly intensive agricultural exploitation of the area formerly used predominantly by semi-nomadic tribes could have resulted in more and more chaotic circumstances and resistance against the Assyrians from the side of the nomads, resulting in troubles when the king died (Masetti-Rouault 1998: 229).

There are also many non-local deportees living in the western provinces. In Chuera and Sabi Abyad groups of Kassites (Babylonians) appear among the names of personnel and hostages (Wiggermann 2000: 185; Jakob 2005: 183). In Chuera there was a group of 17 families from Elamite descent, working as builders, and some brewers were called Suhean, from near Mari on the Euphrates (Jakob 2005: 184-185).

The staff of the Assyrian *dunnu* administration had mostly⁵ Assyrian names and is believed to have been moved to the provinces to manage the Assyrian assets, together with a large number of Assyrian free-born villagers and farmers. However, large numbers of non-Assyrians were very much needed, as workers or craftsmen. Some people with non-Assyrian names acquired positions with more responsibility within the Assyrian administration, like *bel pahete* or *hazi'anu* at other sites, or *abarakku* Tammitte at Sabi Abyad. Although it seems that in legal respect non-Assyrian workers were treated similar to the Assyrian staff of the same rank, it still seemed important to the Assyrians to mention descent, even after several generations of integration. On the other hand, many non-Assyrians over time gave their children Assyrian names, and names alone are not always a secure indication of ethnicity or cultural affiliation (Jakob 2005).

I.3 Previous work on Mitanni and Middle Assyrian ceramics

Archaeological excavations and surveys in the Balikh Valley

Until the start of the excavation project at Tell Hammam et-Turkman in 1981 by Maurits van Loon, the Balikh river valley was a neglected area in Syrian archaeology. Only small surveys and limited excavations had been undertaken in the valley. Concerning the Late Bronze Age the small trenches of Max Mallowan at Tell Jidle, Tell Sahlan and Tell Hammam Ibn Shehab were the first serious activities (Mallowan 1946). But Mallowan considered the Balikh drainage of little importance and left the valley again after these first explorations.

At the confluence of the Balikh and Euphrates, near modern Raqqa, the site of Tell Bi'a / *Tuttul* was first excavated in 1980 by Eva Strommenger, although most attention was directed to the Middle Bronze Age occupation, and no Middle Assyrian ceramics have been found (for the identification of Bi'a with Tuttul, see Strommenger 1977). Excavations at the multi-period site of Tell Hammam et-Turkman, located at 5 km from Sabi Abyad on the Balikh river, were started in 1981. Although work

⁵ But not exclusively: chief steward Tammitte carries a non-Assyrian name.

focussed on the early second millennium BC, Late Bronze Age levels were reached in parts of the excavation (Van Loon 1988; for the ceramics, see Smit 1988). At the site of Tell Chuera/*Harbe* about 40 km east of Sabi Abyad, Middle Assyrian levels were excavated on a modest scale (Klein 1995). At the tiny site of Khirbet esh-Shenef excavations have yielded evidence for Late Bronze Age occupation roughly contemporary with Sabi Abyad (Bartl 1990).

In 1983 Peter Akkermans undertook a systematic regional survey of sites in the Balikh valley. The survey data for the Late Bronze Age have been partly presented by Hans Curvers (1991), and have been studied in detail by Jerry Lyon (2000, n.d.) who included additional survey data gathered during a field season in 1995. A survey in the region between Balikh and Euphrates is in the process of publication (Einwag and Otto in prep., Einwag 1993/4). The Euphrates valley north and south of Raqqa was surveyed by K. Kohlmeyer (1984).

Ceramic studies

The Late Bronze Age ceramics from sites and surveys in the Balikh Valley have for the largest part been presented only in a very general manner. Middle Assyrian ceramics can be found in the publications on the Balikh survey (Curvers 1991), Khirbet esh-Shenef (Bartl 1990), Tell Sabi Abyad (Rossmesl 1989; Akkermans and Rossmesl 1990; Akkermans et al. 1993), Hammam et-Turkman (Smit 1988) and Tell Chuera (Klein 1995). However, in most of these publications discussion of the ceramics is confined to illustrations showing the most common shapes accompanied by a very short description of inclusions, techniques and comparisons. The main purpose of these publications is the general dating and characterization of the archaeological assemblage at the site. A more detailed study of Middle Assyrian ceramics from Sabi Abyad was presented by J. Limpens in her MA thesis (Limpens 1994), which has unfortunately remained unpublished.

Contrary to the Balikh valley, Mitanni and Middle Assyrian ceramics have been studied on a larger scale in the heartland of the Mitanni and Middle Assyrian regions: the upper and lower Khabur River valley and Northern Iraq. The most extensive publication of Mitanni and Middle Assyrian ceramics up to now is Peter Pfälzner's work on the ceramics from Tell Sheikh Hamad/*Dur Katlimmu* (Pfälzner 1995), which includes extensive discussions of chronology and regional distribution. Ceramics from stratigraphical contexts from other sites are generally presented in less elaborate reports or sections of excavation reports. A detailed overview of the Mitanni and Middle Assyrian pottery from excavations and surveys published until 1995 is given in Pfälzner 1995: 169-232, including references, and will not be repeated here. Pottery studies published after 1995 include material from Tell Barri (Anastasio 1997, 1998; D'Agostino 2005, 2006), Tell Chuera (Klein 1995), Tell Brak (Oates *et al.* 1997), Tell al Rimah (Postgate *et al.* 1997), Giricano Höyük (Schachner 2002, 2003), Tell Shioukh Faouqani (Bachelot 1999), Tell Jurn Kabir (Eidem and Pütt 1999), Tell Taban (Ohnuma *et al.* 1998, 2000, Ohnuma and Numoto 2001) and Emar (Attoura 2001). Middle Assyrian pottery is thus quite well-known. All these studies are "classical" presentations of pottery from an excavation, for purposes of dating, chronology and a general impression of the material, without further detailed discussions of the organization of production or the use of the pottery. Yet another presentation of shapes and types of Middle Assyrian pottery would perhaps not be the most useful contribution to the field. At Sabi Abyad, however, the scale of excavation, the enormous amount of material and its preservation, and the excellent textual and archaeological documentation of the settlement leave us in the position to present an integrated picture of ceramics at the site, surpassing the general presentation and moving to a deeper understanding of processes of production and use. In this way Middle Assyrian ceramics do not have to be boring masses of sherds but can turn into an intriguing source of information on Middle Assyrian culture and society.

I.4 Research aims

Pottery is by far the largest find category at Late Bronze Age Sabi Abyad, as at most other archaeological sites dating to the later prehistory or beyond, and therefore by definition one of the more important sources of information on ancient society. This study will present the Middle Assyrian pottery⁶ concentrating on three different fields: typology and chronology, production, and function and use. In some aspects, these topics move from a data-based, object-oriented approach towards a more interpretative reconstruction of the place of pottery in the settlement. The unique results of the excavations at Sabi Abyad and the richness of the data set offer very good opportunities not only to publish descriptions of the pottery and offer comparisons, but also to look into more interesting problems such as the organization of pottery production and use. In chapter II, dealing with methodology, I shall explain how I want to reach these research aims; here they will only be briefly presented.

Typology, chronology and comparisons

A classic aim of pottery studies is simply the presentation of the material. Formal descriptions of shape, inclusions and technology, as well as dating and comparisons with other sites are nowadays becoming standard ingredients of archaeological publications of pottery. In this part of the study the pottery from Sabi Abyad will be described and presented according to a number of variables. The changes between the different stratigraphical levels (sequence) will be established and compared with other sites, to place the pottery in a chronological framework and to position the collection vis-à-vis other sites.

As will be shown in chapter IV, the first Late Bronze Age occupation level (7) contains pottery that is somewhat different from that in the later levels. Some of this pottery can be compared to a kind of pottery generally called “Mitanni” pottery and usually dated to the 14th century BC. Some pottery from this earliest level and almost all of the pottery from the later levels is typically defined as “Middle Assyrian”. The terms Mitanni and Middle Assyrian are not unproblematic, as different ethnic, political, geographical and chronological meanings have been attributed to them. P. Pfälzner suggested that the term “Mitanni” pottery should be used only in a geographical and chronological sense. It then indicates a ceramic tradition present in the Northern Jezira, from the Euphrates to the middle Tigris rivers, in the 14th century BC. The term “Middle Assyrian pottery” has a political meaning as well as a geographical/chronological meaning, because it occurred in all state-organized settlements of the Middle Assyrian empire (Pfälzner 1995: 230-232). Actually, all excavated Middle Assyrian settlements (recognized as such by the pottery) have proved to be state-organized until now.

This study is not the place for a detailed discussion of the connection between material culture (pottery, architecture, art, etc.) and ethnic, social or political groups (cf. Emberling 1997 for a useful summary of this field of study). The pottery suggests a “Mitanni” identification of level 7 (but not necessarily implying that it belonged to the Mitanni state politically), thereby dating it to the 14th

⁶ Ceramic products other than vessels will barely be considered here. These include clay bread ovens, drainage pipes, architectural elements and bricks, figurines, miniature models and wheels, and baked clay molds for producing metal objects. However, it is very well possible that these objects were produced by the same potter, especially when made of the same materials or with similar techniques. Although some objects (figurines, for example) are rather unique and few in number, and may have been produced alongside the ceramic repertoire, others (especially baked bricks and architectural elements) require a substantial work effort of the producer. Drainage pipes are most probably wheel-turned with techniques similar to those used for vessels. It is noted that baked bricks are made of a different, more compact fabric with fewer inclusions than unbaked sun-dried bricks, and were perhaps produced by the potter as well. However, cuneiform sources from Sumerian and Old-Babylonian times seem to suggest that the production of bricks was not the work of the potter (Sallaberger 1996: 3, note 9). All objects at least have the firing stage in common with the ceramic vessels: perhaps they were made by others but fired by the potter. If the Sabi Abyad potters made other ceramic objects (especially bricks and drains) as well, next to vessels (cf. Barrelet 1968: 12), we would have to take into account the consequences for the conclusions reached in this volume concerning production organization, techniques, workshop size, output, time spent on production, etc. For reasons of feasibility, however, I have chosen not to include ceramic products other than vessels in the present analysis. These finds will be published in the forthcoming reports on the excavations.

century BC (see Chapter IV). The other levels are Middle Assyrian, not only in a geographical/chronological sense but also politically, as is clear from the texts from those levels.

Chapter IV will also describe in detail the ceramic sequence between the different Middle Assyrian levels at Sabi Abyad. I shall try to establish whether there is any typological development or change between levels. Moreover, I will try to tie the Sabi Abyad sequence to the detailed sequence presented by Pfälzner (1995), who defined three Middle Assyrian phases for his material. By comparison to other published ceramics, I will try to provide an approximate date for the later levels of Sabi Abyad (levels 4 and 3), which cannot yet be precisely dated by texts.

Pottery production at Tell Sabi Abyad: techniques and organization

Next to formal characteristics, the technological and organizational aspects of the production of pottery can be studied. Although it is not my aim to perform a complete technological analysis there is a lot of information available, even after a field study of the material such as performed for the Sabi Abyad pottery. This includes for example shaping, finishing and decoration techniques, firing, and tools used in production. Moreover, the excavations at Sabi Abyad have yielded a number of finds related to pottery production: pottery kilns, unfired sherds, wasters, and two potters' workshops. These all help to understand how pottery was produced at Sabi Abyad. Beyond the description of shaping techniques, workshops and other pottery-related finds, this part of the thesis will discuss how the organization of pottery production at Sabi Abyad can be reconstructed. Until now, the literature gave only general suggestions about how the production of pottery was organized in the Late Bronze Age Near East, and how the production of pottery was related to society at large (cf. Pfälzner 1995: 241-255). Data from a number of different sources, including the pottery and other finds at the site but also including textual and ethnographical information, will be used in a multidimensional manner to arrive at an understanding of the place of pottery production in Middle Assyrian society.

Function and use of ceramics

The pottery at Sabi Abyad was produced in a large variety of shapes and sizes, including some special shapes obviously designed for a particular function. Sometimes the way pottery was used can be deduced from particular use marks on the vessels, like scratches, damages or burnt patches. The context in which pottery was found, either within functionally recognizable spaces or as part of features or burials, as well as any preserved original contents of the pots give us clues about the use of ceramics at the site. Scarce information from texts and iconography is used to complete the picture of ceramic use and function at Middle Assyrian Sabi Abyad.

A discussion of ceramic use and function not only completes the extensive presentation of pottery as a find category; it also provides an important source of information for future spatial analyses of the finds at the site. Regarding the almost complete excavation and extensive settlement plans, the stratigraphical control and the good preservation of contexts, matched with textual information, Sabi Abyad offers a unique possibility for such spatial analyses of a *dunnu* settlement. Pottery, as a major find category, plays a central role in such an analysis. Spatial analysis of the ceramic finds is outside the scope of this study. However, this study may be seen as a preparatory work for a future project in this field.

I.5 Research questions

This study will specifically try to find answers to the following questions:

- What does the Late Bronze Age pottery from Sabi Abyad look like, including not only the “typical” Middle Assyrian shapes but the full range of ceramic vessels? Are there changes in

shapes or production over time between different stratigraphical levels? Can we identify particular shapes or characteristics for different chronological stages, thus increasing the potential of survey data?

- How does the pottery from Sabi Abyad fit into the existing chronological sequences for ceramic material culture in Northern Mesopotamia, and how does it compare to pottery from other sites?
- How was pottery produced, where on the site was the production located, what materials and techniques were used and how was the pottery fired? How was the production organized, who produced the pottery and for whom? What does the reconstruction of the organization of pottery production tell us about the organization of the *dunnu* as a whole?
- What was the intended function of particular vessel types, and how was pottery used by the inhabitants of Sabi Abyad?