

From the Four Corners of the Earth

Studies in Iconography and Cultures
of the Ancient Near East
in Honour of F. A. M. Wiggermann

Edited by David Kertai
and Olivier Nieuwenhuys

Alter Orient und Altes Testament

Veröffentlichungen zur Kultur und Geschichte des Alten Orients
und des Alten Testaments

Band 441

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2017
Ugarit-Verlag
Münster

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www.ugarit-verlag.com

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Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-86835-216-0
ISSN 0931-4296

Printed on acid-free paper

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WHAT'S COOKING AT THE *DUNNU*?
THOUGHTS ON AN EXOTIC, STEATITE-TEMPERED POTTERY CAULDRON
IN THE 'KITCHEN' OF GRAND VIZIER ILI-PADA AT MIDDLE ASSYRIAN
TELL SABI ABYAD, SYRIA

Kim Duistermaat (Leiden University)

Introduction

The life of the Assyrian managers of the *dunnu* at Tell Sabi Abyad was not always a provincial affair: the high officials and the owner of the *dunnu*, Grand Vizier Ili-pada, enjoyed the luxury of foreign foods and materials. This is clear from textual sources about merchants passing by at the site, and the products they transported to Tell Sabi Abyad and Ashur, but also from the presence of a collection of 'foreign' ceramics among the finds at the *dunnu*. This paper offered to Frans Wiggermann discusses one of the more intriguing examples of these 'exotic' vessels: a large, dark grey cooking pot. Its remarkable size and shape, but especially its exceptional fabric, raise questions as to where this cooking pot was made. From where, how, and why, did it end up at the *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad? And is it possible that this was not an ordinary cooking pot, but part of the equipment of perfume makers?¹

The steatite-tempered cauldron

The vessel (Fig. 1) is handmade, and has a globular shape with a rounded base. The wall is curving inwards towards the top of the vessel, while the rim is bent sharply outward, without a neck. The base of the vessel was most probably made in a mould, after which coils and the 'hammer and anvil' technique were used to build the wall, shape the vessel, and make the vessel wall thin and compact. The vessel wall is remarkably thin and of even thickness throughout the vessel. The surface was scraped and very carefully burnished on both inside and outside, and feels soft to the touch. It has two flattened handles on either side, attached to the rim; at the point where the handles are attached to the body, three sculpted or applied 'tails' fan out to left, right and center, almost like a bird's tail. The rim diameter is 43 cm, and it has an estimated capacity of 43 liters when filled to the rim. It is a beautiful, skillfully made pot, incomparable to any other vessel found at the site.

Both surfaces as well as the core of the fabric are dark grey. The vessel is made of a typical 'cooking ware' fabric with dark grey, angular inclusions. Thin-section analysis (Fig. 2) shows that the pot was made of a rather plastic, non-calcareous, iron-rich clay. The fabric is completely dominated by steatite (soapstone, talc) inclusions, which was confirmed with an XRF analysis of the chemical composition of the fabric. The steatite particles are irregular and sometimes angular, and smaller than 4 mm. Other inclusions are very few, and include some medium-sized to large particles of a metamorphic rock (shale?), often cracked. Also, some small to very small quartz and iron ore (chromite/magnetite) inclusions, and very few small chert, serpentine,

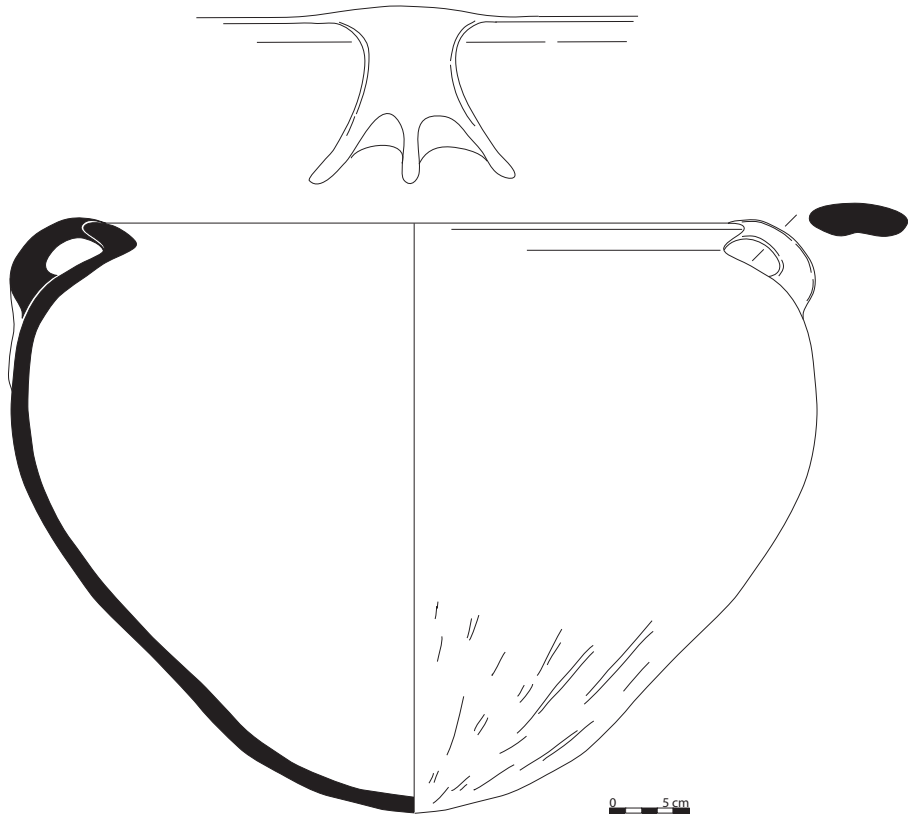


Fig. 1: The steatite-tempered cauldron P93-308 (Duistermaat 2008: fig. IV.62.a; P93-308).

biotite and plagioclase inclusions were seen (Duistermaat 2008: 546-547; Schneider pers. comm. 29-10-2013). This fabric is not local to Tell Sabi Abyad or the Balikh Valley region, but has to come from a place where steatite rock is available (see below). Apart from the fabric, the manufacturing technology, shape, and surface treatment also point to a non-local production for this vessel.

Steatite is an ideal material for the manufacture of cooking pots (Rice 1987: 106, 229), and it was used as such in many regions around the world, including northern America, northern Europe and the Ural (Rapp 2002: 120-123, Anthony 2007: 428). In the Neolithic Near East, a non-calcareous ware with ophiolitic rock inclusions was produced (possibly in the Taurus range north of Tell Sabi Abyad) as Dark Faced Burnished Ware, and imported to northern Syria for its excellent thermal properties (Nieuwenhuys 2007: 82-85 and fig. 5.7.4, 127-132). Even nowadays,² steatite cooking vessels are praised for their ability to withstand very high temperatures, withstand thermal shock, retain heat and conduct heat effectively. Also, steatite does not react with acids and does not give off any particular taste (Law 2008: 413). Daszkiewicz *et al.*'s study (2000) on the water permeability and thermal shock resistance of our pot showed that it must have been excellently suited for use over a fire. It was imperme-

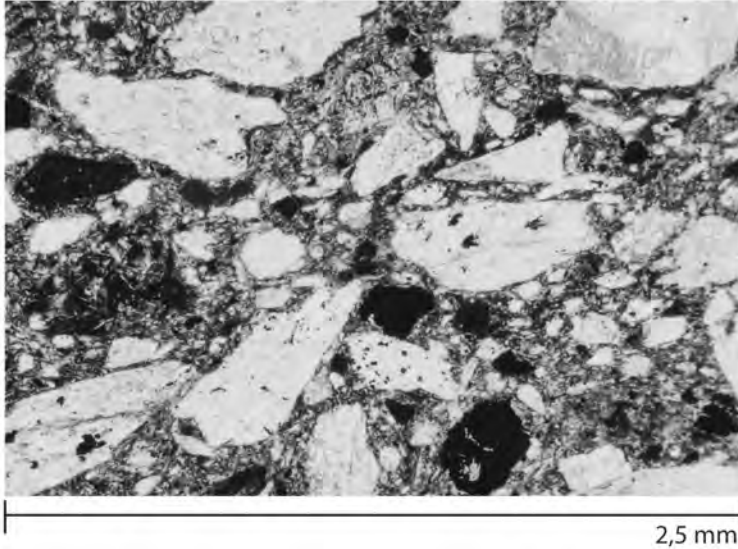


Fig. 2: Thin-section photograph (xpl, printed in greyscale) of cooking pot P93-308. Very many steatite inclusions are visible as light or whitish particles. The black grains are metamorphic rock (shale?).

able, due to the dense fabric and the burnished inner and outer surfaces, and was very resistant to thermal shock. It is therefore likely that the pot was imported to Tell Sabi Abyad for its excellent properties as a cooking vessel (Duistermaat 2008: 547).

The archaeological context

Our cauldron was found at Tell Sabi Abyad in Level 5, dated between the end of the reign of Tukulti-Ninurta I in 1197 BCE and the death of the *dunnu*'s owner Ili-pada at around 1183 BCE (Duistermaat 2008: 95).

The cooking pot was found in a room just north of the entrance to the *dunnu*'s tower (Akkermans 2006: fig. 3; room 17). The room measures 4.5 by 3 meters, has raised fireplaces or ovens built in rows along the northern and southern walls, and was called a 'kitchen' by the excavators. This room was part of a large, multi-roomed building, including several other large rectangular rooms, an enclosed courtyard with a paved floor, and a lavatory with two toilets. The building was called 'the office' and is thought to have been used for the residence and work of a large group of people. Cuneiform tablets that had fallen from the second floor of this building suggest that these people were members of the *dunnu* staff (Akkermans 2006: 207). Several of these tablets deal with beer brewers, and refer to 'the house of the brewer Silli-Ishtar-Nabula'. Whether or not the 'kitchen' can be equated with the 'brewery' is, however, unsure, since the tablets may also refer to the brewer's residence or his storage room (Akkermans 2006: 208).

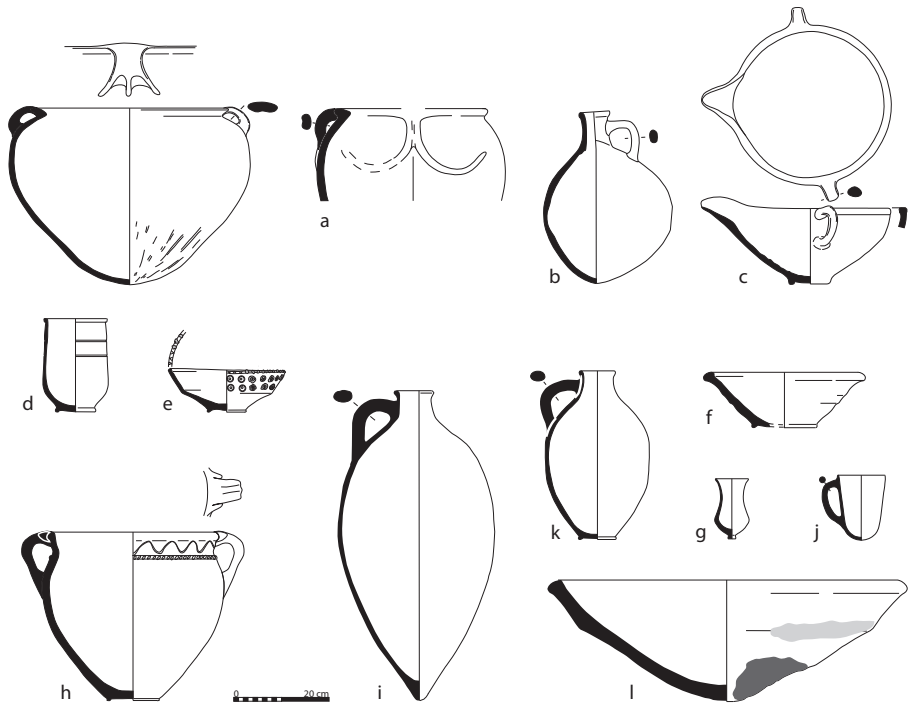


Fig. 3: The steatite-tempered cauldron and a selection of 'foreign' vessels found in the same context: a-e: from the 'kitchen'; f-i: from a room in the north of the 'office' building; j-l: from a large room in the east of the 'office' building. See Duistermaat 2008 for detailed descriptions of these vessels.

The ceramic finds from the 'kitchen' and other spaces in the 'office' building form an interesting assemblage, dating from the end of Level 5. Apart from the many typical Middle Assyrian vessels, such as large jars with ribbon rims, nipple based goblets and carinated bowls, there were many exceptional forms that do not belong to the familiar Middle Assyrian repertoire (Fig. 3). In the 'kitchen', our cauldron was accompanied by another burnished cooking pot with handles and a fanciful application below the handle (Fig. 3a, however this one has coarse calcite inclusions, not steatite), several burnished asymmetrical flasks with handles (b), several burnished large bowls with two handles and a spout (c), measuring vessels (d), and dark burnished bowls with white-filled impressed decorations (e). In the northernmost two rooms of the building, special shapes include light green glazed bowls (f), more burnished bowls with handles and spouts, some burnished asymmetrical flasks, a very slender goblet (g), a pot with two handles and incised decoration (h), and a large jar with a pointed base and a handle (i). And in the large rectangular room in the east of the building, a nice burnished drinking cup with handle (j), a small jar with a handle (k), and a very heavy and large bowl (l, rim diameter 72 cm) were among the inventory.

For most of the special shapes, it is clear that they—like our cooking pot—

must have been imported to the site from elsewhere (Duistermaat 2008: fig. V.24). The petrographical analyses of a selected number of samples suggested that these vessels came from various areas, most probably in the greater Jezira, while one flask probably came from the Upper Euphrates area. For most, it is not possible to further pin down the area of origin based on thin-section analyses only (Duistermaat 2008: 506). For some vessels, parallels could be found in the assemblages of other, more or less contemporary, sites (Duistermaat 2008: 66-72 and the catalogue in figs. IV.36-98). The asymmetrical flasks find parallels at Ugarit (Monchambert 2004: fig. 54 nos. 802, 803), Emar (Caubet 1982: 74 and fig. 30), as well as at Tarsus (Goldman et al. 1956: nos. 1193 and 1194) and Köşkerbaba Höyük near Malatya (Bilgi 1985), which would fit nicely with the evidence from the thin-section analysis pointing towards the Upper Euphrates region for one of these vessels. The bowls with handles and spouts can—superficially—be compared to bowls at Tell al-Rimah (Postgate et al. 1997: pl. 101, pl. 25a) and Hadidi (Dornemann 1981: fig. 10 no. 7). A large jar with a pointed base and a handle, and a pot with two handles and incised incisions, can be compared to vessels from Emar and Hadidi (Caubet 1982: no. 31; Finkbeiner 2001: Abb. 11). The grey burnished bowls with inlaid white circle decorations have parallels at several sites ranging from Tarsus to Nuzi (D'Agostino 2008: 530-531 with further references).³ It is clear that our steatite-tempered cauldron was part of an assemblage of pottery deriving from 'abroad'. Interestingly, the majority of the vessels that were identified as imports to Tell Sabi Abyad in Level 5 came from the 'office' building.⁴ This suggests that the people living or working at the 'office' were those most involved in the *dunnu*'s contacts beyond the region; the steward and especially the *dunnu* owner Ili-pada are the most likely candidates.

Other cooking pots at Tell Sabi Abyad

The large steatite-tempered cauldron was not the only cooking pot found at Tell Sabi Abyad. Cooking pots were found in low numbers in all areas of the site, but especially in the southern part of the settlement. These pots were made with techniques, fabrics and in shapes that are different from our cauldron. Typically, they are wheel thrown, globular, closed shapes with a rolled rim and a rounded base. Rims have thickened or slightly pointed triangular profiles. Rim diameters range from 20-30 cm; no complete shapes were found. In rare cases, knob handles are attached to the rim, but generally these pots have no handles (Fig. 4). The pots are brownish, reddish or orange-brown, and surfaces are never burnished, in contrast to our imported pot. The fabric consists of a calcareous clay with coarse sand or coarse calcite inclusions. Several vessels were studied in thin-section. They probably came from multiple sources in the greater Jezira region, while volcanic rock inclusions in some examples suggest that they did not come from the Balikh Valley itself (Duistermaat 2008: 220, 543-544). Their wide distribution is also supported by parallels from other sites, for example at Tell al-Rimah (Postgate et al. 1997: pl. 63 nos. 589, 590), Giricano (Schachner 2002: Abb. 25c), or Tell Sheikh Hamad / Dur Katlimmu (Pfälzner 1995: Taf. 116 c, d). Parallels can also be found at, e.g., Tell Afis (Venturi 2010: 3, fig. 9.7-12). Similar globular wheel-

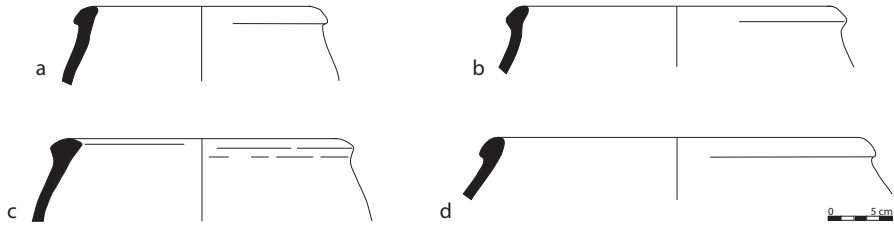


Fig. 4: Regular cooking pots from Sabi Abyad Level 5. See Duistermaat 2008: fig. IV.62 for detailed descriptions.

made pots with rolled rims and no handles, made from a coarse fabric with mineral inclusions can be found at Lidar Höyük; these are said to be typical for the LBA at the site (e.g., Müller 1996: fig. 54 no. 1). It is very likely that these cooking pots were not made by the Middle Assyrian state potters, but rather were obtained from local potters in the area. A study of the permeability and thermal shock resistance of one pot showed that it is not very strong (Daszkiewicz et al. 2000), possibly related to the fact that this was a broken, discarded cooking pot that had already suffered many stresses during its use life. But certainly, its technical properties for use as a cooking pot must have been far inferior to those of our cauldron.

Steatite rock and the origin of the Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron

Steatite (soapstone, talc) is a type of metamorphic rock that occurs in many places in the world. It is composed mainly of the mineral talc, and also contains smaller quantities of other minerals. Steatite is formed mainly near plate boundaries, in ophiolite zones (where the oceanic crust has been raised above sea level due to tectonic plate collision), or in other regions where ultramafic or dolomitic rocks have been altered by pressure or temperature (Bevan 2007: 172; Press and Siever 1985: 511; Law 2002: 158). Whether or not steatite is formed in any of these zones or regions depends on local circumstances and presence of parent rocks; the presence of an ophiolite zone does not necessarily mean steatite can be found there.

Ophiolite outcrops can be found in a wide arc surrounding Tell Sabi Abyad, running from Cyprus and Ras el-Bassit in the west, the Iskenderun area, via the Taurus mountains from Tarsus at the Mediterranean coast to Malatya in the north, to Lake Van, Lake Urmia and the Zagros in the north-east and east. Also, there are many more ophiolite outcrops in central and eastern Turkey. Fig. 5 gives a very general idea of the location of these zones; a precise and complete overview of all possible locations would require very detailed geological maps that are often not available.⁵ Not on the map are extensive outcrops in western Turkey, the Aegean, Italy, Oman and South Arabia, Iran and the Indus valley (David 2001: fig. 1; Moorey 1994: 21). It is safe to say that our cooking pot must have come from at least 200 km away, and cannot have come from the Assyrian heartland.

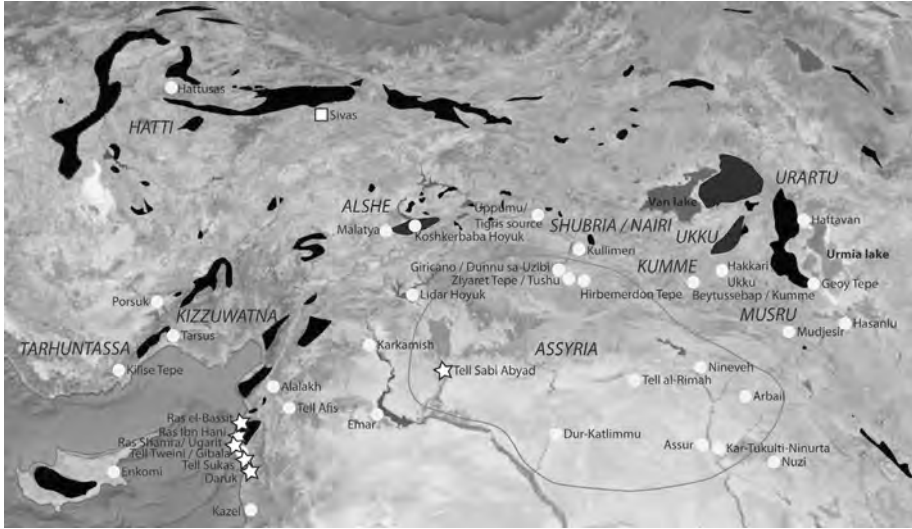


Fig. 5: Google Earth-based map showing the approximate location of ophiolite zones (in black, based on Çelik et al. 2011: Fig. 1), and the location of Tell Sabi Abyad and other sites discussed in the text. Stars indicate sites where steatite-tempered cooking pots have been found. The solid line indicates the approximate border of the Middle Assyrian empire.

Local traditions of steatite exploitation

The use of steatite in pottery was possibly connected to other local uses of the stone; craftsmen working with the material for other purposes would have been familiar with the location of steatite outcrops and with the technical and thermal properties of the stone. If this was the case for the vessel from Tell Sabi Abyad, we should first look at those areas known for their exploitation of steatite in antiquity. Steatite (or the macroscopically similar and geologically related chloritite or serpentinite,⁶ cf. Bevan 2007: 5) was exploited in the Near East since the Neolithic, to make vessels, metal casting moulds, tuyères, stamp and cylinder seals, beads, spindle whorls, figurines and statues, etc. The most well-known ophiolite zones that were exploited in antiquity for its steatite rocks are south-central Iran (around Tepe Yahya and Jiroft), northern Oman and Bactria. Objects made from steatite coming from these regions have been found all over the Near East and the Mediterranean (Moorey 1994: 37; Bevan in press; Bevan 2007: 173, 176). Other well-known ophiolite zones exploited in antiquity include the Troödos mountains on Cyprus and the Baer-Bassit range at the Syrian coast near Ugarit. Interestingly, a merchant from Ugarit was trading steatite (called *algabašu*, or *algamišu* in Akkadian, CAD A/I: 337ff., but see Pardee 2000: 37 who translates ‘basalt’) together with metal, timber, doves, horses, wool, aromatic plants, walnuts and reeds (RS15.062). The same merchant (Yabninu) also traded large quantities of different perfumed oils (Bevan 2007: 178-179; Courtois 1990: 120-124). Moreover, both the Hittite king and the king of Amurru asked Ugarit to send them this stone, which was perhaps not easily available in their lands (RS20.255A and RSO VII, 17;

Pardee 2000: 37-38). In the Late Bronze Age, Ugarit saw a small-scale tradition of chloritite vessel production. In the LBA and EIA chloritite vessels were also produced on Cyprus, mainly in Enkomi. Some of them copy metal vessel shapes (Bevan in press; Bevan 2012: 228 no. CYP4-12).

Metal ores, especially copper but also gold and silver, often occur in the same geological formations as steatite,⁷ and there seem to be strong links between the use of softstones, the exploitation of these regions for resources like metal, timber and other tree products, and the production of grey burnished pottery wares. Interestingly, these dark burnished wares often imitate metal vessel shapes, stressing the links with metalworking even more (Bevan in press; Bevan 2007: 155, 170-178). Perhaps our cauldron is part of such a tradition.

Although ophiolite outcrops are present in many places, as is clear from Fig. 5, not all these deposits were exploited in antiquity. Interestingly, the use of steatite for the production of stone vessels does not seem to have been a central Anatolian tradition in the Late Bronze Age (Bevan in press; Bevan 2007: 157), although many outcrops are present and talc mines are exploited in north central Turkey, near Sivas, until today.⁸ A complicating factor is that there have been few attempts in Near Eastern Archaeology to link steatite objects to their regions of origin with archaeometric techniques, and it appears to be very complicated to pinpoint regions of origin (cf. David 2001; Moorey 1994: 22, 47ff.; Bar-Yosef Mayer et al. 2004; Beale 1973; more work has been done in the Indus Valley (Law 2002; 2008; 2012) and especially North America). Even when steatite objects are found in a region that also has ophiolite outcrops, doubts may still exist as to whether these objects were produced from local stone or were imported to the site (e.g., Bevan 2007: 78 for objects from 3rd millennium BCE Byblos). Also, there may have been regions where steatite was mined in antiquity but that are still unknown to us, and outcrops of friable rocks unsuitable for making objects may have yielded suitable temper material for cooking pot production. Nevertheless, if we take a possible connection to local steatite processing traditions as an angle for our search for the origin of our cauldron, our view would be directed to the west (Ugarit, Cyprus) for sources relatively close to Tell Sabi Abyad, and towards the east and south-east (Iran, Oman and beyond) for long-distance sources.

Steatite-tempered cooking ware at the LBA-IA transition

The first attestation of the use of steatite as temper for cooking pots in Late Bronze Age Syria comes from the very end of the period, from the destruction level at Ras Shamra (Ugarit) (the very beginning of the 12th century BCE). There, in the 'Maison aux Albâtres', a large cauldron was found in room AW, adjacent to kitchen AB (Fig. 6). It was made of a fabric dominated by a large amount of coarse (1-4 mm) steatite inclusions (Lagarce and Lagarce 1974: 8; Birney 2008: 565; Lagarce pers. comm.). Excavator Jacques Lagarce says⁹ that the pot in Fig. 6 has a rim diameter of ca. 60 cm, and the handles are plain, not sculpted as our cauldron. It has a rolled rim and seems to have a rather flat base, unlike our Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron. Like our pot, it was handmade (with the coiling technique) and burnished on the inside as well



Fig. 6: The large steatite-tempered cauldron found in the Maison aux Albâtres, Ugarit, shown from the outside and the inside (photograph: J. Lagarce).

as outside. It has a mauve color with a grey core, and traces of soot from use over a fire. Interestingly, the pot was repaired in antiquity with more than 10 lead clamps; presumably it was a precious vessel that could not easily be replaced, and was worth repairing. As Lagarce rightly pointed out in his communication with me, the pot could not have been heated too fiercely after it was repaired, as lead will melt at 327 °C. Nevertheless, the repairs did not make the pot worthless. The use of lead clamps to repair large pottery vessels is well-known in Late Bronze Age Sardinia, Italy and Greece (e.g., Karageorghis 2011: 89-90), and was probably present in other regions as well. The Ugarit pot was not necessarily repaired at the site: Sardinian (although not steatite-tempered) pottery repaired with lead clamps was exported to Crete and Cyprus at the turn of the 13th - 12th century BCE (Karageorghis 2011: 89), so the Ugarit pot may have come to the site already mended. However, it could of course also have been repaired locally. Considering the proximity of Ugarit to the ophiolite zone of Baer-Bassit, a local provenance cannot be excluded until petrographic analyses are carried out. It is, however, unclear whether the Baer-Bassit zone contains actual steatite outcrops (Du Piêd 2011: 221). At Ugarit the appearance of steatite as temper is a new phenomenon without local precursors, in spite of Ugarit's location near the ophiolite zone. The Ugarit cauldron is until now the only contemporary parallel that I could find for our large steatite-tempered pot from Tell Sabi Abyad. The technology, size and fabric are comparable, as is the presence of two handles. The detailed shape of the rim and the handles are not very similar.

Also in the final years of the LBA, handmade cooking pots were introduced as a new phenomenon in Tell Tweini Level 7A, ¹⁴C dated to the beginning of the 12th century BCE and contemporaneous with the destruction level at Ugarit. These cooking pots have nearly vertical, slightly incurving walls, a flat base with rounded transition to the wall, and two rounded handles attached to the simple rim. Rim diameters are 15-20 cm. The pots are burnished and handmade. The fabric contains about 25% of metamorphic rock fragments such as schist and gneiss, and no microfossils, suggesting a possible non-local origin (Vansteenhuyse and Bretschneider 2011: 190; Vansteenhuyse 2010: 42-43 and fig. 6). Although the Tweini pots are similar in shape

to the later steatite-tempered (talc fabric) pots from Ras Ibn Hani (see below), they are made from a different fabric not containing steatite but fragments of other rocks deriving from the ophiolite zone.

Steatite-tempered cooking pots were then made for a short while in Iron Age I, and were found from the earliest IA occupation onwards at Ras el-Bassit, Ras Ibn Hani, Tell Sukas and Daruk in Syria (Du Piéd 2011; Vansteenhuyse 2010: 42-43 also for references to original literature; Birney 2008: table 2). At Ras el-Bassit, some steatite inclusions were found in pots from a transitional LBA/EIA level, and occasionally steatite was found among inclusions in pots made from different fabrics in the EIA. Steatite-tempered cooking pots were used in the EIA levels at Bassit alongside the existing non-steatite-tempered burnished cooking pots. At Bassit, there is a rather large variety in rim shapes of the steatite-tempered cooking pots: ranging from vertical walls with outward bent rims to incurving walls with vertical rims. Some, but not all of these pots have handles. The pots were handmade and sometimes finished on the wheel or completely wheelmade, and not burnished (Du Pied 2006-2007). In Ras Ibn Hani in the EIA, cooking pots and low-rimmed baking trays were hand made in a steatite-tempered fabric. The pots from Ras Ibn Hani are not burnished, and have uneven, bumpy surfaces. Their walls have irregular thickness and the bases are relatively thick (Birney 2008: 565; Du Piéd 2011: 221 and fig. 5D). The cooking pots at Ras Ibn Hani show less variety in shape. They are vessels with a vertical wall and a simple rim and handles, which slowly evolve towards holemouth shapes. Sometimes, handles are ridged. At Ibn Hani, steatite-tempered fabrics have replaced the earlier LBA cooking pot fabrics completely, in contrast to Bassit. As to the origin of the Ibn Hani pots, Du Piéd (2011: 221) suggests they are probably local, although it is not clear whether steatite is available in the ophiolites of the Baer-Bassit range. Also, the Ibn Hani sherds do not contain radiolarite chert fragments, which is said to be characteristic for rocks in the ophiolite zones of Baer-Bassit and Hatay, but are absent from Cyprus (Cohen-Weinberger and Goren 2004: 71-73). Thin-section analysis of the Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron did show one tiny fragment of chert, possibly radiolarite, but this in itself is not enough to confirm a northern Levantine origin (Schneider pers. comm. 29-10-2013).

To confirm or exclude the Baer-Bassit range as a source for the steatite would require a program of compositional analysis of fabrics, individual grains and rock samples from the area. It would also be very instructive to compare the fabrics of steatite and non-steatite-tempered cooking pots from Tell Sabi Abyad, Tell Tweini, Ras el-Bassit and Ras Ibn Hani in thin-section. The cauldrons from Ugarit and Tell Sabi Abyad seem to be the only ones whose fabrics are completely dominated by steatite inclusions, in contrast to the IA pots that seem to have a mixture of inclusions of which steatite or related rocks form one ingredient. Whether or not the use of steatite in the EIA was, at first, a deliberate attempt to follow the example of the Ugarit (and Tell Sabi Abyad) cauldron and introduce the superior qualities of steatite to an already existing tradition of handmade cooking pots, will have to remain unclear for the moment. If the EIA coastal pots were indeed produced locally from rocks found in the Baer-Bassit ophiolite zone, the similarity of shapes and technology with non-steatite-tempered vessels (as at Ras el-Bassit) and the fact that 'steatite' was apparently

used in varying amounts in cooking wares at different sites and times, may suggest that by this time the exclusive use of steatite as temper was not deemed very crucial. Some potters who obtained temper materials from the ophiolite zone may have found a steatite vein and continued to use the material because it proved to function well in cooking pots. The abandonment of steatite as temper (see below) may also have been accidental rather than on purpose; perhaps, at the location where these temper materials were found, the steatite was all used up or getting harder to reach.

In the Iron Age, the use of steatite temper gradually decreases (both in the amount of steatite used in a pot, and in the percentage of cooking pots including steatite) and then disappears (Birney 2008: 566). Cooking pots of similar shapes but with different non-steatite fabrics take their place. In the later Iron Age, cooking pots are typically more globular, holemouth pots with simple rims and two simple handles on the rim. These are often wheel made and not burnished (Birney 2008: table 1). Several of the IA II pots from Tell Tweini have handles that show 'two or three lines drawn by the fingers of the potter' (Vansteenhuyse 2010: 43 and fig. 9-10). Although these handles are thus a bit more elaborate than the usual simple band handles, they do not resemble the handles on the Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron: the characteristic 'tail' is absent from the Tweini pots, and the Tell Sabi Abyad handles are smooth, not ribbed. The IA holemouth cooking pots are not comparable to our cauldron.

Summarizing, at the very end of the LBA there is a sudden and almost contemporaneous¹⁰ appearance of large, handmade, thin-walled, carefully burnished steatite-tempered cauldrons - one at Ugarit and one in Tell Sabi Abyad - without local precedents. The origin of these pots is unknown, although raw materials may perhaps have been found near Ras el-Bassit. Shortly after, in the region between Ras el-Bassit and Daruk on the Syrian coast, there is a short-lived and probably unrelated tradition of smaller, rather crudely handmade or wheel-finished and unburnished cooking vessels with varying amounts of steatite and other metamorphic inclusions, for which a local origin is likely but not confirmed either. This soon evolved into a tradition of (non-steatite tempered) Band Handled Cooking Pots.

On Cyprus, some fragments of pottery with talc inclusions were found at Kition (Pilides and Boileau 2011: 117 and figs. 3, 3a) dated later than the first steatite-tempered cooking pots from Ras Ibn Hani and Ras el-Bassit (Du Piéd 2011: 221). The shape of the vessels is unclear as only body sherds are illustrated. This fabric was probably not produced at Kition itself, but rather somewhere in the Troödos mountains near the ophiolite outcrops. Pilides and Boileau do not claim that this fabric is similar to that of the steatite-tempered cooking pots from the Syrian coast (2011: 117), but it is possible. The thin-section slide published of the Kition examples (*idem*, fig. 3a) looks very different from the Tell Sabi Abyad fabric.¹¹

In Yemen, a long tradition of producing steatite-tempered hemispherical cooking bowls existed since c. 1100 BCE or a bit earlier (Blakely and Glanzman 1996; their shape is very different from our pot). Apparently, crushed steatite was used for its thermal properties in cooking ware. In the 4th century BCE, these steatite-tempered pottery bowls were replaced by identical looking cooking bowls carved from steatite rock. The steatite pottery production seems to have been a local tradition, and there is no evidence for trade in these pots. However, Blakely and Glanzman (1996: 24) won-

der whether this tradition initially developed locally, or was introduced from somewhere else at the end of the Bronze Age. In the UAE, steatite is also used occasionally as temper in pottery fabrics, for example at the site of Kalba in the Late Bronze Age (c. 1500-1300 BCE). However, there are no comparisons for our cauldron or the handle shape in the Gulf or South Arabia (Carl Phillips, pers. comm. 23-10-2013).

I did not find any other attestations of the use of steatite as a temper material in LBA/EIA Syria or Turkey or other nearby regions.¹² That is not to say that the pot cannot have come from any of these places. It is of course very well possible that even if steatite was used in excavated pottery it was not recognized as such, unless the pottery was studied by a specialist or submitted for petrographic analysis.¹³ Still, the similarity in fabrics and general shape would at least suggest that the cauldrons from Ugarit and Tell Sabi Abyad stem from the same tradition and were produced in the same region (whether or not at the Syrian coast), even if they are not completely similar in shape.

Non-steatite-tempered LBA or EIA handmade cooking pots and other comparisons

We have already seen above that our cauldron is not part of the local cooking pot tradition in the Assyrian territory. It is now useful to have a look at contemporary ceramic cooking vessels without steatite temper from elsewhere, to see whether our cauldron may be related. Birney, in her discussion of the Syrian coastal phenomenon of steatite-tempered wares, suggests (2008: 565) that the use of steatite in cooking pots should not be overrated (see also above), and she sees the steatite-tempered pots simply as early examples of the 'Band Handled Cooking Pot' (BHCP) tradition of the early Iron Age Levant and Amuq. The BHCPs, however, differ in shape, technology, decoration, fabric and surface treatment from our Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron.

For a comparison of the general shape, we will again have to look at Ugarit first. Several large, cauldron shaped pots were published from this site (Monchambert 2004: figs. 83-89; see also Schaeffer 1949: fig. 85, e.g., nos. 2, 3, 6, 7 and fig. 86, e.g., no. 11). The Ugarit cooking pots and cauldrons show a large variety in rim diameters (up to 60 cm) and in rim shapes, but outward bent simple rims are ubiquitous. Handles are plain but always attached at the rim. All pots are described as wheel made, and have coarse mineral inclusions that are not further specified. Several pots are bur-nished, some on both inside as well as outside.

The outward bent simple rim in general does occur more often in large hand-made cooking pots of the Levant, for example at Tell Arqa in LBA I and in Lachish in LBA II (Spagnoli 2010a: pl. 1 no. 7 and pl. 60 no. 682). However, these pots never have handles. Most LBA handmade Cypriot cooking pots are generally smaller than our vessel, more globular, and of a different fabric and surface treatment, although handles do tend to be attached to the outward bent rim as in our pot, not to the body (Jung 2011).

Comparisons can also be found in assemblages to the north of Tell Sabi Abyad, for example at Lidar Höyük, a site located at the Euphrates. In the assemblage from the end of the LBA and the beginning of the IA, there is a large variety of

cooking pots. All are wheel made, apart from the typical IA 'rillen Keramik' which is handmade but otherwise not comparable to our pot. Cooking pots with sharply outward bent rim, wheel made of a fabric with coarse feldspar and chaff inclusions, with or without handles, occur in large amounts. These pots are identified as the 'standard' form of cooking pots for the end of the LBA and the EIA (Müller 1996: 133: fig. 76 no. 1).

One of the more striking aspects of our cauldron is the peculiar shape of the handles. The cooking pots from the Syrian coast and the Levant either have no handles, or have plain handles, without the three raised lines fanning out at the attachment to the body. Parallels to our handle come from the north or north-east of Tell Sabi Abyad, for example in EIA contexts in the Upper Tigris at Hirbemerdon Tepe. There, handles similar to the Tell Sabi Abyad ones are used on typical Iron Age holemouth pots, with burnished surfaces and simple rims instead of outward bent rims (Guido Guarducci, pers. comm.; in prep.)¹⁴ Another (late) IA comparison possibly comes from Lidar Höyük, from a wheel made cooking pot with a rolled rim. The side of the handle seems to have finger impressions at the point where it reaches the vessel shoulder (Müller 1996: fig. 66 no. 10). A third parallel may be a handle fragment from Geoy Tepe in Iran, just west of Lake Urmia, (period A, early Iron Age).¹⁵ This is a rim fragment of a pottery vessel, perhaps a cooking pot. The flat handle is attached to the rim and shows three raised 'tails' at the point where it has been attached to the vessel shoulder, and a central ridge. The Geoy sherd was apparently not made in a steatite-tempered fabric.

Where did the Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron come from?

Considering all evidence, Ugarit and its surroundings are likely candidates for the origin of our cooking pot. There, a contemporary parallel was found in the large steatite-tempered cauldron from Ugarit. A pre-existing tradition of large cooking pots with more or less comparable shapes and two handles attached to the rim (but of different fabric and technology) can also be found at Ugarit. Steatite might have been locally available, and was used in the EIA tradition of handmade cooking pots with steatite inclusions. However, the general shape and rim shape also occur on cooking pots in the Upper Euphrates and southeastern Anatolian / Taurus region (although, again, in different fabrics and technological tradition). Burnished, handmade cooking pots are present in this region at the end of the LBA and the EIA. Also, there are parallels for our typical handle shape from the Upper Tigris region in the EIA. Until further petrographical research is carried out on vessels from different sites and on possible source rocks, or until a more exact parallel is found that matches the shape, fabric and technology of our vessel, both regions must be considered a possible candidate for the place of origin.

Although a full exploration of the foreign relations of Tell Sabi Abyad would certainly deserve a separate paper and is not in my capacity, it is necessary to briefly touch the subject here. Objects from faraway places may have reached Tell Sabi Abyad in a variety of ways. They may, for instance, have been the property of foreigners (e.g., deportees, or the members of a trading caravan) residing at the site, or

of Assyrian officials who obtained the goods when tribute or booty from military expeditions was redistributed. If our cauldron was produced in the areas to the north and north-east (Van/Urmia, Zagros), this may have been a plausible scenario. Military expeditions seem to have been the main source of material from that area. It is clear that large numbers of copper and bronze cauldrons, for example, were obtained during expeditions to the mountainous regions to the north and north-east (Faist 2001: 45-49). Trade with the mountainous regions north and northeast of the Assyrian empire is less well documented, and was probably passing through towns like Kulishinas in the Khabur, and Azalaka in the mountains north of Tell Sabi Abyad, where merchants were based (Faist 2001: 176, 197).

If our cauldron has a western or north-western origin, it is more likely that our pot reached the *dunnu* through exchange or trade rather than via military expeditions. In the Middle Assyrian period, the main source for foreign materials obtained through trade was the Hittite Empire. There is however no evidence for direct trade contacts between Assyria and Hatti, nor the Aegean, Cyprus, or Egypt: everything from the west passed through the go-between cities of Emar, Carchemish, Sidon, and Ugarit (Faist 2001). Although the exchange of pottery vessels is not documented in the Middle Assyrian sources, archaeological evidence shows that pottery was transported over quite large distances. The *dunnu* of Tell Sabi Abyad is located at the western border of the Middle Assyrian Empire and at a natural crossroads of routes connecting the capital Assur with the Syrian coast and the Hittite Empire. We have already seen that several other pottery vessels find parallels at Emar and further west, at Ugarit and Tarsus. This fits nicely with the textual evidence from Tell Sabi Abyad, indicating that the *dunnu* functioned as a customs post for trading caravans (Akkermans 2006: 201). There are about eight cuneiform tablets containing information about merchants in Tell Sabi Abyad, mostly dating to Level 5 like our cauldron and most imported ceramics at the site.¹⁶ At least ten different people are mentioned in these texts as merchants (*tamkāru*). As far as their place of origin is noted, they all come from the west: Emar, Canaan and Sidon, and some use Levantine seals (Faist 2001: 139-143; Wiggermann 2010: 23, 33-34; Wiggermann 2000: 197). Through the caravans of the merchants, the elite at Tell Sabi Abyad received a variety of products, either for further shipment to the capital or for their own use. The texts mention honey, spices, horses, *persaduḫu*-balsam¹⁷, and tin (Faist 2001: 54, 60), obviously all luxury goods. Export products included *sehpu* (tree-bark, CAD S: 238-239) and bronze (Faist 2001: 72). Sporadic archaeological finds such as a Hittite stamp seal and an Egyptian(-izing) scarab are further witnesses to these western contacts and interests at Tell Sabi Abyad (Wiggermann 2010: figs. 15 and 16).

Clues to the use of the cauldron: cauldrons of similar shape in other media

Large ceramic cooking pots such as our cauldron are rarely found at sites dating to the Middle Assyrian period, so it is difficult to draw parallels with other MA archaeological contexts. However, large cauldrons were used and appreciated, as is clear from texts and images from, mainly, the Neo-Assyrian period.¹⁸ These sources do of course

not relate specifically to our cauldron, as our pot was not made in Assyria.

In Neo-Assyrian reliefs, large cauldrons similar to ours are occasionally depicted. Generally, it is thought that metal cauldrons are illustrated. Cauldrons depicted on reliefs seem to occur in several contexts. Examples of religious contexts are the White Obelisk from Nineveh (Pritchard 1954: no. 624; see also Duistermaat 2008: 462-465: fig. VI.30, VI.31, VI.32), and a relief from Sargon II's palace in Khorsabad (Botta 1849: pl. 141). On both, we see large globular vessels with incurving upper bodies and rims turned outwards. They are standing on pot stands in front of the temple. The temple in Sargon's relief is the temple of Haldi in Musasir, located in the mountains between Nineveh and Lake Urmia (Radner 2012: 245 ff., fig. 17.06 and n. 66). That (metal) cauldrons were deemed valuable is clear on reliefs where booty is being carried out of conquered towns, for example on slab A from the North Palace of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, depicting the sacking and destruction of the Elamite city of Hamanu (Barnett 1976: pl. 66). The Assyrians are shown carrying off furniture and other booty, among which a large cauldron carried on the shoulder of one of the soldiers (Fig. 7). This cauldron is very similar to our Tell Sabi Abyad pot, at least when shape is concerned. It is a globular vessel with inward turning upper body, and outward bent rim. Two handles are shown, attached to the rim. On the Rassam Obelisk, metal cauldrons are brought in as tribute by people from the north, as is clear from the accompanying text on the obelisk (Reade 1980; Parker 2003). Depictions of the use of cauldrons for cooking can be found, for example, on reliefs showing military camps from the palace of Ashurbanipal. The first (Barnett 1976: pl. 66c), shows a large cauldron sitting on a pot stand in the middle of a tent. Like the jar depicted on the other side of the tent, it was probably used to contain a liquid or food. On the second relief (Slab B; Barnett 1976: pl. 66), an Assyrian cook is seated inside a tent, in front of a large cauldron that sits over a fire. He is about to use a large spoon to stir the contents (Fig. 8). Another cauldron is depicted on one of Sennacherib's reliefs, illustrating how timber was transported on the Tigris from the mountains in Turkey. Two log drivers are sitting on the logs, a cauldron between them (for cooking?; Barnett et al. 1998: pl. 106, see also pl. 226; cf. also Parker 2002: fig. 11). These cauldrons are all similar in shape and size to our Tell Sabi Abyad vessel, including the outward bent rim and the two handles. Patrick McGovern relates the cauldrons shown on Assyrian reliefs to the drinking set found at Gordion, and to the elite practice of wine drinking. He suggests that metal cauldrons were essentially an Urartian or Anatolian highland tradition, adopted by the Assyrian elite when they started to appreciate and mix wines at banquets (McGovern 2007: 196).

Large cooking vessels also occur in cuneiform texts from various periods. One of the more likely candidates for a vessel similar to our pottery cauldron is the *diqāru*. According to the texts, a *diqāru* is a deep bowl used for serving and heating. It can be made of metal, stone or pottery. A text from Middle Assyrian Dur-Katlimmu talks about the import of bronze *diqārus* via Carchemish (Cancik-Kirschbaum 1996: no. 6). Interestingly, stone *diqārus* (in an Old Babylonian dowry) are made of *algamišu*-stone, which might be translated as 'steatite' or a similar soft stone (see above). That made me wonder whether our cauldron was perceived by the Assyrians as a pottery vessel (with steatite inclusions), or as an (artificial) stone vessel made



Fig. 7: Assyrians carry off furniture and cauldrons during the sacking of the Elamite city of Hamanu (Barnett 1976: pl. 66).

from (ground) steatite with clay as a bonding agent. Metal *diqārus* are found in texts among household utensils, among the properties of deportees, and as booty. Metal, stone or pottery *diqārus* are used for boiling and have soot on the surface. They are used for boiling meat. They are also used in medicine and perfume preparation, for heating, brewing and mixing the mixture of water, oil and aromata (CAD D: 157; see also Duistermaat 2008: 448). Metal *diqārus*, whether used for cooking or for perfume production, had to be ‘polished’ or ‘wiped clean’ once in a while, most probably to re-



Fig. 8: Two men busy preparing food in a tent (Barnett 1976: pl. 66).

move oxidation, soot or encrusted food rests from its surface. In Neo Assyrian times, there even was an employee called ‘*kāpir diqāri*’ entrusted with this job. This person is closely connected to the palace or temple kitchen staff (Gaspa 2009).

Hardly any metal cauldrons have been preserved in the Near East or the Mediterranean. It is thus difficult to compare our cauldron to actual metal counterparts. However, the general shape of the vessel, its typical handles, the shiny bur-nished surface and the dark color may indicate that some relation with metal vessel production existed (if our vessel was not an actual skeuomorph of a metal cauldron). Interestingly, a relation with metal vessels was also suggested for the Ugarit cauldron (Buhl 1983: 115; Du Piéd 2011: 223). The relation between metal production and steatite exploration is clear (see above), as is the relation between pottery, stone (steatite) and metal cauldrons in texts. The handles of our cauldron are interesting in this respect: if the vessel was indeed copying metal examples, one could speculate that the handles and their typical ‘tails’ represent an early version of the later bird and griffin handles on metal cauldrons from Iron Age Hasanlu, Gordion, etc. I will leave this for what it’s worth at this point, as a discussion of metal vessels and their handle attachments is beyond the scope of this paper.

This brief look at the context of cauldrons in other media shows several interesting points. Firstly, the shape as depicted on reliefs and the word *diqāru* show a strong link with metal vessels. In texts, there is also a link to soft stones or steatite. Secondly, images and texts show a relation with use for boiling over a fire, the preparation of food, and with the preparation of perfume oil. Thirdly, almost all sources

point to regions in the north and east for the occurrence of these vessels: Hurrian deportees, the palace in Nineveh, the temple in Musasir, the sacking of the Elamite city of Hamanu, tribute from northern people, transport of timber from the Taurus. This may be due to a bias in topics depicted in the Neo-Assyrian reliefs, but it is nevertheless worth mentioning when we consider the possible origin of our cauldron.

What's cooking at Tell Sabi Abyad?

The technical properties of our cauldron, the traces of soot on the surface, and the archaeological context in which it was found, all suggest that the vessel was used to heat something over a fire. The shape of the vessel suggests that it was most probably used over a *tannur* (William Glanzman, pers. comm. 27-10-2013). Interestingly, our pot was found among the remains of one of several fire installations constructed along the 'kitchen' wall.

Possibly, the cauldron was used in perfume production, using¹⁹ the imported *persaduḫu*-balsam (see above for attestations of the use of *diqārus* in this process). The exotic and rare character of the balsam may then have been balanced by the particular traits and properties of the exotic 'soapstone' vessel used for the preparation of the perfume.²⁰ The pot may even have been imported together with the main ingredients, including olive oil and the spice plants requested by Ili-pada for the perfume makers (Wiggermann 2000: 173, 197, Tell Sabi Abyad texts T96-1 and T97-34 (found in the 'office'), both dating to Level 5).²¹ According to the 'perfume recipes' from Assur, the ingredients had to simmer over a fire for long periods, even days on end (Jakob 2003: 476-486). Perhaps, the excellent properties of our cauldron made it suitable for such an intense use, in contrast to the normal, rather fragile small cooking pots used at the site for daily cooking. Some of the other 'foreign' vessels, such as the bowls with two handles and a spout (Fig. 3c), may have been used in the process as well, for example to decant the mixture, to separate oil and water, and to remove solid residues (in the texts, a vessel used for this purpose is called *ḫersu*; Duistermaat 2008: 461; Jakob 2003: 476-486 with further references). Perhaps they can be compared to burnished one- and two-handled Mycenaean spouted bowls used for perfume production at, e.g., Pylos (Rawson's types 6, 7, 9, 10) and Zygouries in Greece (Lis 2006: 22 and n. 64; see also Rougemont 2012: 368 for further references). Perfume was certainly produced in the capital Assur, as known from the 'recipes' mentioned above, but also from texts in the archive of Babu-aha-iddina, where a man called Sareni is training female perfume makers in this elite household. Nicholas Postgate suggests that Sareni is a non-Assyrian, possibly Hurrian, name (Postgate 2013: 222 and n. 55). Was perfume making a specialty of Hurrian people from the mountains where the aromatics grew, and were the 'recipes' found at Assur written down for the instruction of local workers? The topic of perfume production and the possible connections to the pottery found in the 'office' building certainly deserve a more detailed study.

Since there are indications that the 'office' was used by the brewer, part of whose correspondence was found in the building, we should also consider whether the cauldron could have been used to make beer. The use of heat in beer brewing has

been attested in Sumerian contexts (Powell 1994: 98), but it seems there some kind of oven is used rather than a cooking pot. I do not know whether cooking was part of the process in the Middle Assyrian period, but it does not seem to have been mentioned specifically in texts about beer brewing (Jakob 2003: 401-407). Cooking vessels do not seem to have been part of excavated breweries such as in Hadidi (Gates 1988: 66-68) or Tell Bazi (Zarnkow et al. 2006).

More mundanely, our cauldron of course may have been used for cooking food. The normal diet of the inhabitants of the *dunnu* at Tell Sabi Abyad seems to have consisted of bread or other dishes made from grain, onions and beer, sometimes supplemented with some cress. Lentils, fennel, chick peas and oil were also consumed, as well as a variety of spices such as garlic, coriander and cumin, but there is hardly any evidence for regular consumption of fruits. The texts do not contain information about dairy or meat, but faunal remains indicate that the bulk of the animal products must have come from sheep/goat, while pork and beef were eaten much less. There is also evidence for the occasional consumption of gazelle, wild boar, fallow deer, ostriches, doves and other birds (Duistermaat 2008: 452, 458). It seems that cooked foodstuffs did not form a large part of the diet at the *dunnu*, a fact that is mirrored in the very low percentage of cooking pots in the ceramic assemblage in general (<0.4%; Duistermaat 2008: 459). However, small and large cooking pots were used for cooking in the Assyrian culture, whether made from metal or pottery (see above). A question that immediately comes to mind in this context is why there would have been a need for such a large cooking pot. In a large room of the 'office building', another huge ceramic vessel was found (Duistermaat 2008: fig. IV.58.f). The shape of this bowl reminds us of the ubiquitous 'carinated bowl', the normal serving bowl of which thousands are found at any Middle Assyrian site. Carinated bowls were most likely used for serving food in the 'mezzeh' style of serving different dishes simultaneously in small bowls (Duistermaat 2008: 439). However, this bowl has a rim diameter of 72 cm. If it was used to serve food, it may be an indication that banquets with a large number of guests were held or prepared in the 'office' building. Several other 'foreign' vessels from this context can also be related to serving food or drink, including glazed bowls, burnished goblets and a large crater (see Fig. 3). Our cooking pot may have been used in the context of such public feasts. That these banquets took place becomes clear from the texts found at the site (T97-23, T01-2, T99-13). There were dinner parties organized by the steward of the *dunnu*, and also more formal banquets hosted by Grand Vizier Ili-pada. The amounts of food described in the texts suggest that perhaps between 20 and 40 guests, including 'foreign delegates' were present at such occasions. Whether or not Ili-pada's chef cooked 'foreign' recipes in our exotic cauldron must remain unclear. A ritual form of a banquet—the annual *šākultu/tākultu* ceremony celebrated in the capital and cities all over the empire—is illustrated in another text (T97-34, found in the 'office'), in which Ili-pada urges his steward to speed up the perfume makers for 'the yearly occasion', since 'during the banquet I will be pouring out (scented) oil on behalf of the king' (Wiggermann 2008: 560-561).

Conclusions

Our cauldron most likely came from some place on the wide arc surrounding Tell Sabi Abyad from Ugarit in the west to the Zagros in the east. Ugarit and the Syrian coastal region are a suitable candidate as a place of origin. There, a good parallel was found for our cauldron. Steatite may be available close by (although not confirmed), there was a limited local tradition of stone vessel production, and merchants from Ugarit were trading in steatite. Also, there is a local tradition of somewhat comparable, but not steatite-tempered, cooking pots. Several other imported pottery vessels at Tell Sabi Abyad also show connections to the west, as do textual sources about the *dunnu*'s trading contacts. However, the use of steatite as temper in pottery does not seem to have any local precursors, and there also does not seem to be a strong relation to the '*c eramique   la st eatite*' tradition of the EIA at the coast.

Another good candidate as a place of origin is less well-defined, but includes the Taurus mountains and foothills to the north and northeast of Tell Sabi Abyad. Here, and especially in the east, there are large possible sources of steatite. Although there are no contemporary examples of the use of steatite in pottery from this area, there is a Neolithic tradition of the use of ophiolitic rocks in cooking wares. There are comparable non-steatite tempered cooking wares in the region. Most interestingly, we have seen a few comparisons for our peculiar handle in southeastern Anatolia. In metal, such sculpted handles can be found at Hasanlu and Gordion, also pointing to a northern or northeastern tradition. Some of the other imported pottery vessels from the 'office' show connections to the north and northeast, including Nuzi, the Upper Tigris and the Upper Euphrates area. In texts and images, metal cauldrons and *diq arus* are mainly linked to the mountains to the north and northeast.

Both the west and the north/northeast seem to be suitable candidates, and a definite conclusion about the origin of the steatite-tempered cauldron will not be possible without additional compositional analyses. However, I personally prefer the northern/northeastern option, and suggest our cauldron (and the Ugarit one) came from the Taurus mountains of southeastern Anatolia.

Our pot may have reached Tell Sabi Abyad as part of the cargo of a merchant, either *en route* between the Mediterranean coast and Assur, or from the Taurus or Cilicia. Merchants attested at Tell Sabi Abyad came from the west, and carried mainly luxury goods with them, such as honey and balsam. We cannot exclude the possibility that the pot was initially the 'packaging material' for a specific product. However, it is more likely that our pot was also a luxury item, imported for its specific and superior qualities as a cooking pot. I think that the use of steatite temper in the Tell Sabi Abyad cauldron is not coincidental, but rather represents a deliberate attempt to create a vessel with certain properties or connotations. Its foreign provenance and special fabric may have added to the exclusive character of the vessel and may even have imbued it with 'magical', rather than only practical, powers (cf. also Faist 2001: 77 n. 1). Considering the social context of trade relations in the Middle Assyrian period, our pot is firmly placed in an elite context of the royal family and high-ranking officials (Faist 2001: 78). This is also confirmed by the archaeological context of our pot in the 'office building' and the other special or luxury vessels (such as glazed wares) found there.

The fact that steatite-tempered cauldrons were deemed valuable is also shown by the extensive repairs of the Ugarit cauldron.

Two possible contexts for use have been outlined: use as a cooking vessel (or, less likely, a serving vessel) for elite banquets, or use as a vessel for the preparation of perfumes. The culinary use is supported by the depiction on reliefs of similarly shaped metal cauldrons during cooking, and by the use of *diqārus* for cooking food in texts. Also, other vessels found in the 'office' may be related to the organization of meals for a large group. What remains unclear, however, is to what extent cooking in a pot was part of Tell Sabi Abyad's culinary practices, and why a metal cauldron could not have been used for this purpose. I rather prefer the second, more interesting option: our cauldron was used for the production of perfumed oil at Tell Sabi Abyad. Throughout, there are recurring but circumstantial links between our vessel and perfume: steatite in general is linked to perfume and cosmetics because of its 'soapy' feel; the Ugarit merchant trading steatite also traded perfume and aromatics; in texts, *diqārus* are sometimes made of steatite, and they are used for perfume production; the special properties of the vessel make it excellently suited for the long simmering required in this process; also, ingredients for perfume production were imported to Tell Sabi Abyad, and texts comment on the production of perfume for a yearly ceremonial banquet. More solid indications come from the comparisons between the spouted bowls found together with our vessel, and the spouted bowls used for perfume production in the Aegean.

Only residue analyses may yield conclusive evidence for the vessel's use. However, whether our cauldron was used for a banquet or in perfume production, it is clear that it was special, and belonged in an elite context of international relations and consumption of luxury items. Looks can be deceiving: like a piece of jewelry or a beautifully carved seal, our broken, black, pottery cauldron confirms both the links of the *dunnu* to the highest elites and the role of the *dunnu* in the international relations of the empire. Whether enjoying a banquet or a good anointing, life was not all that bad for Ili-pada in the far west of the Assyrian empire; when remembering the many pleasant evenings we spent under the stars at Tell Sabi Abyad, I hope Frans Wiggermann will agree.

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Notes

- ¹ I would like to express my gratitude to Nicholas Postgate, David Kertai and Jacques Lagarce for their useful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.
- ² As for example here http://www.soapstones.com/soapstone_kitchenware.html (accessed 23 September 2013).
- ³ A detailed discussion of all 'imported' pottery to the site will have to be left for a future paper.
- ⁴ However, this does not imply that all pots came from the same region, or reached Sabi Abyad in the same event or at the same time.
- ⁵ For such a detailed study of softstones (chlorite, serpentinite, steatite) on Crete and their exploitation in antiquity, see Becker 1976; for Oman (chlorite), see David 2001.
- ⁶ These rocks are hard to tell apart without laboratory analysis, and names are used mostly without an established relation to the actual composition. For practical reasons I will call all these rocks 'steatite' here. The Sabi Abyad cauldron was confirmed by thin-section and XRF analysis to have steatite (not chloritite or serpentinite) inclusions.
- ⁷ The steatite in our cauldron shows inclusions of iron ores (chromite/magnetite), see above.
- ⁸ http://www.mta.gov.tr/v2.0/default.php?id=maden_yataklari (accessed 28 September 2013).
- ⁹ Personal communication 21 September and 8 October 2013. The photo in Fig. 6 was kindly provided by Jacques Lagarce, and I thank him for his permission to reproduce it here.
- ¹⁰ The calendar date of Ugarit's destruction (1197 or 1192 BCE?) provides a terminus ante quem for the cauldrons but does not say anything about when they were produced or when they arrived at the site. The fact that the Ugarit cauldron was repaired indicates that it was not brand new anymore at the time of Ugarit's destruction. Whether the Sabi Abyad cauldron and the Ugarit one are contemporaneous, or one predates or postdates the other, depends on which dates are followed for the destruction of Ugarit and for the reigns of Tukulti Ninurta I and his successors. If we follow Wiggermann in his dating of Sabi Abyad Level 5 (c. 1196-1183 BCE, cf. Duistermaat 2008: 95), the Ugarit cauldron would date somewhat earlier than the Sabi Abyad pot.
- ¹¹ To my knowledge there are no published thin-sections from the Syrian examples.
- ¹² Apart from searching the literature accessible to me, I have asked many experts whether our cauldron, its fabric and its typical handles could be compared to vessels anywhere in Italy, the Aegean, Cyprus, the Levant, Central, Eastern and Southern Turkey, Egypt, Iran, Armenia, the Caucasus, the Ural, the Indus, Oman, the Gulf and South Arabia. In this respect, I express my sincere thanks to (in random order) Bradley Parker, Marie-Henriette Gates, Claudia Glatz, Ulf-Dietrich Schoop, Michael Danti, Stephan Kroll, Valerie Matoian, Jacques Lagarce, Hermann Genz, Gerwulf Schneider, Federica Spagnoli, Lynn Dodd, Mara Horowitz, Elif Ünü, Daniel Potts, Kimiyoshi Matsumara, Andreas Schachner, Adam Thomas Smith, Sara Strack, Andrew Bevan, Robert Carter, Arnulf Hausleiter, Lione du Piéd, Randall Law, Sarah Collins, Eric Olijdam, David Anthony, Vassos Karageorghis, Ourania Kouka, Bartek Lis, St John Simpson, Carl Phillips, Paul Nicholson, Karen Rubinson, William Glanzman, Janine Bourriau, Birgitta Hallager, Reinhard Jung, Guido Guarducci, Joachim Bretschneider, Ernie Haerincx, Pamela Rose, Uwe Müller, Bülent Kızılduman, Geoffrey Summers, Fulvia Lo Schiavo, Önder Bilgi, and Jean-Yves Monchambert for their helpful suggestions on the topic. Thanks are also due to Victor Klinkenberg and Merel

Brüning of the Sabi Abyad team.

- ¹³ Gerwulf Schneider and Małgorzata Daszkiewicz kindly checked their extensive petrographical databases of thousands of pottery analyses from a wide range of periods and regions, but found only three examples of a similar use of steatite: one from Roman Austria, one from Islamic Sudan and our cooking pot.
- ¹⁴ Önder Bilgi also thinks that our pot is Early Iron Age in date and comes from Southeastern Anatolia, pers. comm. 5-12-2013.
- ¹⁵ Now in the collection of the British Museum, no. 134665:
http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1552671&partId=1&matcult=8945&page=1 (accessed 13 September 2013).
- ¹⁶ These texts are currently being prepared for publication by Frans Wiggermann; I base myself here on the summary published in Faist 2001.
- ¹⁷ Persaduḫu-balsam has been identified as opobalsamum, a fragrant resin originating from trees that grow in Palestine or Arabia. It is used as a fragrance in, for example, perfumed oil production, and must have been very expensive (Faist 2001: 57 n. 11 and 69 n.78).
- ¹⁸ Although they date several centuries later than our cauldron, they belong to the same Assyrian cultural tradition and may, with due caution, be used as illustration of possible cultural practice in the past.
- ¹⁹ However, it is clear from the text concerning the balsam (T93-20) that Tamitte, the steward of the *dunnu*, is not allowed to take any of the balsam: if any balsam goes missing from the trading caravan, he shall be executed (Akkermans and Wiggermann 1999: 63).
- ²⁰ Apart from the name soapstone, there are other loose associations between steatite and cosmetics: many of the small steatite/chloritite vessels from the 3rd millennium BCE were used as perfume containers, possibly related to the soft, soapy or unguent feel of the stone (Bevan 2007: 175). Today, talc is an important ingredient in the cosmetic industry.
- ²¹ It is possible that the perfume makers mentioned in the first text were at Ili-pada's city residence, rather than at Sabi Abyad. In T97-34, the perfume makers appear to be located at Sabi Abyad. Were perfume makers resident at many sites, or did they travel around, like potters occasionally did (Duistermaat 2008: 346)?