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Evolution as a way of intertwining: regional approach and new data on the Halaf-Ubaid transition in Northern Mesopotamia

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ABSTRACT

The Ubaid represents a fundamental phase for the emergence of social complexity and is the first cultural phenomenon having spread throughout almost the entire Fertile Crescent. A long-lasting debate exists about the modalities of this expansion, while its chronology – around the last quarter of the sixth millennium BC – is generally considered as well established. However, recent reassessments of some ancient radiocarbon dates and ceramic data from the whole Ubaid sphere clearly suggest that the chronology of the emergence of the Ubaid is as controversial as the modalities of this process. On the basis of new data from northern Mesopotamia and the northern Levant, this paper focuses on the Halaf-Ubaid Transition, as well as on the contact between the Ubaid and other cultural entities in Levantine areas generally considered as external to the Ubaid sphere. Technical and morpho-stylistic analysis of some sixth millennium assemblages seems to suggest that the Ubaid expansion could have begun much earlier than generally imagined and could have implied very frequent and deep cultural relations with other Mesopotamian and Levantine cultures.

KEYWORDS

Ubaid, Halaf-Ubaid Transition, Wadi Rabah, ceramic technology, northern Mesopotamia, northern Levant, Lebanon

1. Introduction. A controversial diffusion

Despite almost a century of research from its discovery, the Ubaid largely remains a ‘strikingly contourless’¹ phenomenon. In particular, its beginning, defined as the Halaf-Ubaid transition (HUT), constitutes an extremely little-known phase.² Despite the rarity of well-stratified and chronologically reliable contexts, HUT is generally attributed to the third quarter of the sixth millennium (about 5500-5200 BC)³ and marks a crucial change in Northern Mesopotamian economy, identities and social organization.⁴ But if there is a wide consensus to consider this step as a fundamental moment in the process of emerging social complexity, there is no certainty about the means through which the Ubaid spread over an area of unprecedented dimensions,⁵ from southern Mesopotamia to the northern Levant. Even concerning terminology, the use of the term ‘Ubaid’ is far from consistent, because it deals with a pottery style, a period as well as a cultural assemblage. The ‘Ubaidness’ of this assemblage is traditionally defined by some material traits: black or brown on buff painted ceramics, baked clay nails or mullers, baked clay sickles, ophidian figurines with coffee-bean eyes, circumferential head shaping, tripartite houses, public architecture with niched and buttressed façades and extramural communal cemeteries. However, black-on buff very distinctive pottery has always been the most important indicator of the Ubaid⁶ and has been used to establish a widely accepted internal chronology with different phases.⁷ For this reason, any kind of reflection aimed at suggesting a better understanding of how the Ubaid assemblage emerged in the North has to focus especially on ceramic data and radiocarbon dates.

About the so-called Ubaid expansion, once abandoned the idea of a massive migration of southern people towards the North,⁸ two models currently remain:

- The Ubaid expansion would have been made by a process of acculturation starting from a contact zone, probably located in central Iraq or in the Diyala Valley, between the northern Halaf and the south-Mesopotamian Ubaid.⁹
- Or it should be attributed to the limited penetration in the North of small groups, which would have progressively become more and more important and able to influence the local material culture.¹⁰

The only certainty about this dynamic of expansion seems to be its chronology. In fact, both the hypotheses share the conviction that the Ubaid would have begun to spread in the North (fig. 1) especially by acculturation once reached a quite advanced phase in the South (during the Ubaid 3, around 5300 BC).

However, if this had been the case, a long process of acculturation would not have started before this stage and would have lasted a long time, whereas in the last quarter of the sixth millennium the whole northern Mesopotamia and the northern Levant already belong to the Ubaid horizon. Moreover, in the case of an acculturation starting from a single zone of physical and cultural contact between Halaf and Ubaid communities (as in Breniquet’s theory), the Ubaid expansion would not be immediate throughout the North but, on the contrary, it would have implied a gradual and relatively protracted process, with a progressive diffusion of Ubaid characters in areas increasingly far from the initial contact zone. Instead, calibrated radiocarbon dates for the emergence of the Ubaid do not present chronological gaps between central Iraq, northern Syrian and Iraqi regions and the Northern Levant.¹¹

¹ NISSEN 1989, p. 245.

² DAVIDSON 1977.

³ CAMPBELL, FLETCHER 2010, p. 69.

⁴ MÜHL, NIEUWENHUYSE 2016, pp. 28-30.

⁵ CARTER, PHILIP (eds.) 2010a.

⁶ CARTER, PHILIP 2010b, p. 3.

⁷ OATES 1960a.

⁸ MALLOWAN, ROSE 1935.

⁹ BRENIQUET 1996.

¹⁰ STEIN 2010.

¹¹ CAMPBELL, FLETCHER 2010, p. 72.

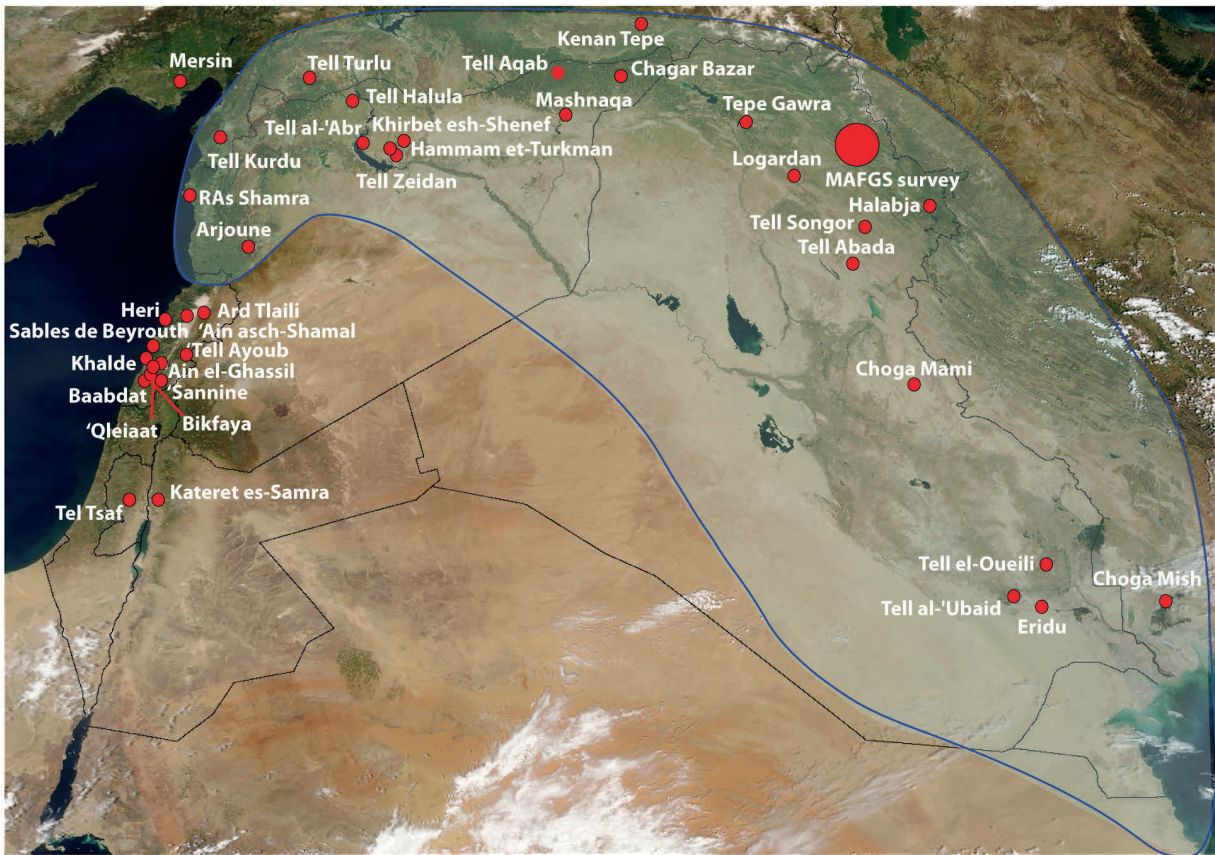


FIGURE 1
Sites mentioned in the text and approximate limits of the Ubaid cultural sphere

2. Making the picture even more controversial: between unfitting radiocarbon dates and anomalous ceramic parallels

In the last years, some scholars focused on new Mid-Holocene radiocarbon samples and on the reevaluation of ancient dates: to correct some possible distortions as the so-called 'old wood effects', only short-lived samples have been used. If we bring all together these new results (table 1), the outcome is a Mesopotamian and north-Levantine chronology where some data (like the ubiquitous nature of Ubaid in the north since the Ubaid 3 onwards) are pretty obvious, while other elements are quite unexpected. In particular, it seems that since its early phase during the first centuries of the sixth millennium BC, the Ubaid quickly established a network of contacts

stretching from southern Mesopotamia over north Mesopotamia and the northern Levant.

Ceramic typology provides a tool to test and validate this absolute chronology. In other words, if the Ubaid began to spread in the whole North since its early stages, then clear traces of ancient Ubaid must be documented by the ceramic typology in northern Mesopotamia and in the northern Levant. The synchronization of the Ubaid pottery confirms the existence of different large regions or ceramic macro-provinces: southern Mesopotamia, northern Mesopotamia and the northern Levant.¹² Several generic features are documented in all the macro-provinces and belong to a shared early Ubaid repertoire. It is the case of simple and quite fine trian-

¹² For the definition of the Ubaid ceramic provinces see BALDI 2016, 118-119, fig. 1.

TABLE 1

Summary framework of the Ubaid periodization based on relative chronology (OATES 1960a) and radiocarbon dates from Mesopotamia and the northern Levant

Dates BC	Oates Chronology	Northern Levant	Northern Mesopotamia	Southern Mesopotamia
5900-5300	Ubaid 1-2 (Halaf in Northern Mesopotamia and the Northern Levant)	Arjouné Trench VII-VI Tell Kurdu (Amuq C)	Tepe Gawra XIX Tell Zeidan (L. 33-27) Khirbet esh-Shenef Str. 3	Tell el-Oueili Ubaid 1 Eridu XIX
5300-4900	Ubaid 3		Tepe Gawra XVII-XV Tell Zeidan (L. 16/15) Mashnaqa Hamman-et-Turkman IV Tell al-'Abr 7-6	
4900-4500	Ubaid 4	Arjouné Trench V Mersin XVI	Kenan Tepe Tell al-'Abr 5-2 Tepe Gawra XIV - XII	Tell el-Oueili Ubaid 4-5

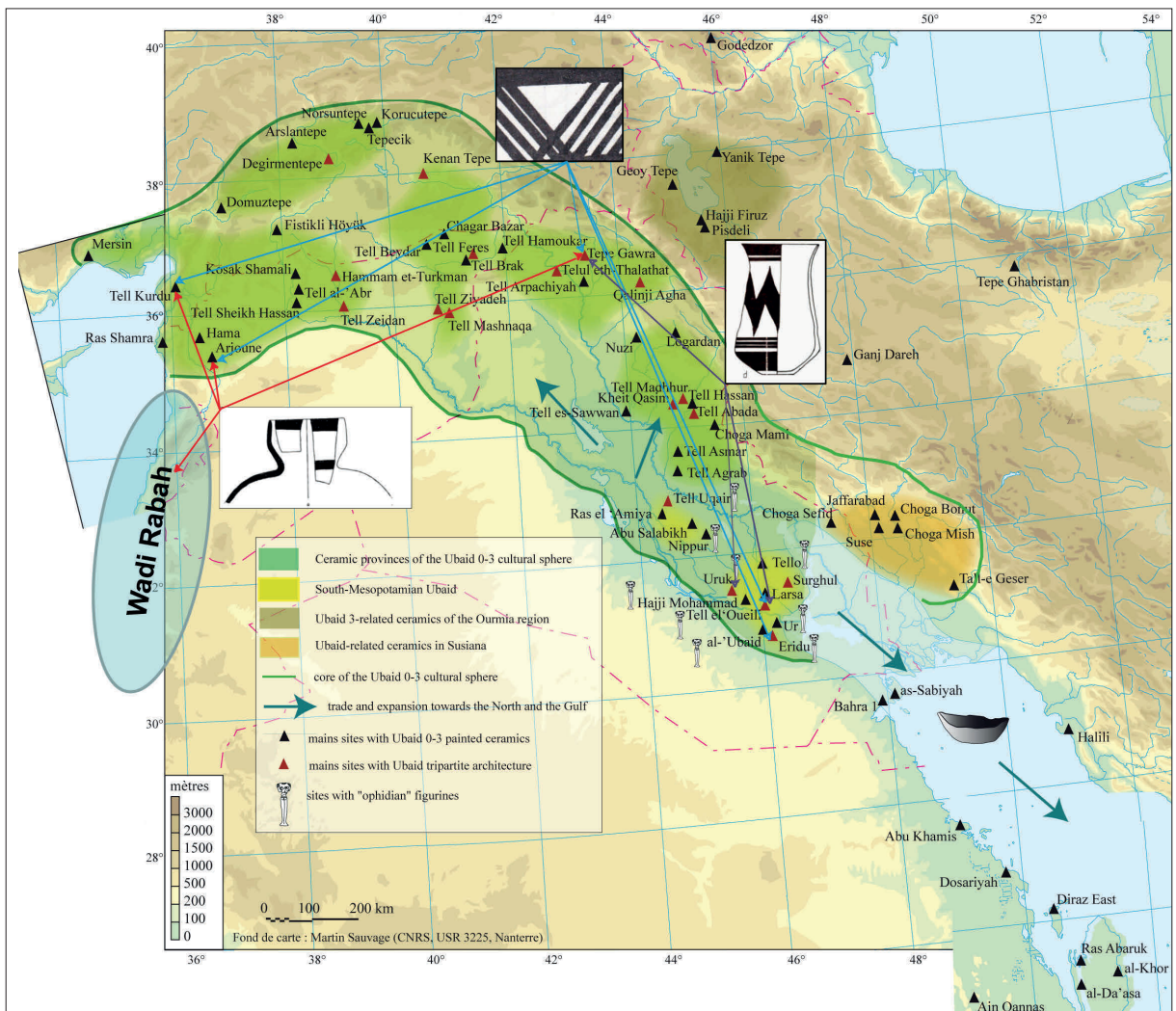
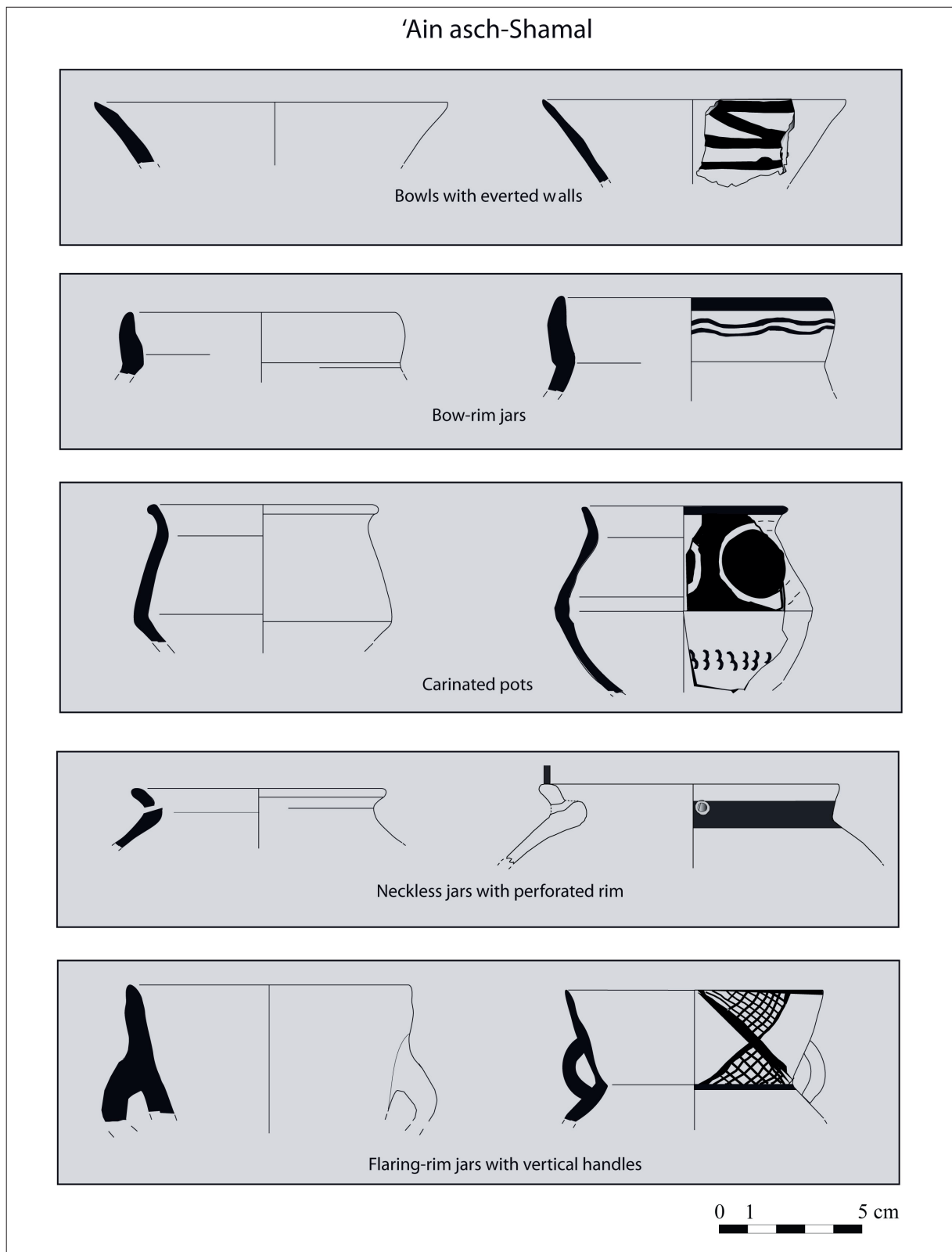


FIGURE 2 Sites of the Ubaid sphere and distribution of some morpho-stylistic traits of the early Ubaid (Ubaid 1-2)

TABLE 2

Comparative table of some Wadi Rabah (on the left) and Ubaid (on the right) ceramic shapes from 'Ain al-Shamal (selected samples from the collection of the Museum of Lebanese Prehistory, Beirut)



gular or oblique painted decorations (fig. 2),¹³ close carinated goblets,¹⁴ plates with elaborate chessboard decorations,¹⁵ as well as painted zig-zag bands joined by linear traits.¹⁶ On the contrary, some diagnostic shapes are very specific to certain areas. For instance, the only known samples of short-necked internally-angled jars are attested in central and northern Mesopotamia.¹⁷ Likewise, bow-rim jars are exclusively documented in the northern Levant¹⁸ and in northern Mesopotamia.¹⁹ Indeed, in the sixth millennium BC, bow-rim jars constitute a typical trait of the Wadi Rabah assemblages in the Levant,²⁰ as well as of the Halaf repertoire in northern Mesopotamia.²¹ Parallels between Wadi Rabah and Halaf traditions are not surprising in themselves since it is largely demonstrated that these two entities are

¹³ See at Oueili Ubaid 1-2 in the South (BRENIQUET 1996, Pl. X.5, 7-8; Pl. XVI.2, 4; Pl. XXV.1), at Tell Abada III in central Mesopotamia (JASIM 1985, fig. 107.g), or at Tepe Gawra XIX-XVIII in the North (TOBLER 1950, Pl. LXIX.b.5, 12; Pl. LXXI.a.9, LXXI.a.20).

¹⁴ See at Oueili Ubaid 1 (BRENIQUET 1996, Pl. VIII.3), at Abada III (JASIM 1985, fig. 100.c-d), or at Tepe Gawra XIX (TOBLER 1950, Pl. LXIX.b.1).

¹⁵ See at Eridu (SAFAR ET AL. 1981, p. 203, fig. 94:4), Oueili (BRENIQUET 1996, p. 177, Pl. VI.1), Tell Abada (JASIM 1985, fig. 102.b), Tepe Gawra (TOBLER 1950, Pl. LXIX.b.4).

¹⁶ See for instance in the Ubaid 1 levels at Oueili (BRENIQUET 1996, Pl. XV.4, 8), at Tell Abada III (JASIM 1985, fig. 100.a), or at Tepe Gawra XIX-XVIII (TOBLER 1950, Pl. LXIX.a.11, LXIX.b.2, LXX.b.2-3).

¹⁷ See at Tell Abada III (JASIM 1985, fig. 103. Sc.2/5) and at Tell Zeidan (STEIN 2010, fig. 17.2).

¹⁸ Bow rims make their first appearance in this period. Early samples are known from Ras Shamra IV A and IIIC (DE CONTENSON 1992, p. 208, fig. 199:4; 226, fig. 217:2) and then from Ras Shamra IVC and B (DE CONTENSON 1992, p. 188, fig. 179:8; 194, fig. 185:5, 6; 208, fig. 199:4-6), but also from Tell Kurdu D (YENER ET AL. 2000, p. 109, fig. 15:16-18).

¹⁹ Bow rim jars are a main characteristic of the early Ubaid phases in the North: they occur for instance at Khirbet es-Shenef (AKKERMANS 1993, p. 100, fig. 3.33: 39-41) and Tell Aqab (DAVIDSON, WATKINS 1981, p. 8, fig. 3:4). Later, some bow-rim jars are also documented in Ubaid 3 levels at Tell Turlu VII (BRENIQUET 1991, p. Pl. XVI:15,16), Hammam et Turkman (AKKERMANS 1988b, Pl. 75:102) and Tell el-Abr 7 (HAMMADE, YAMAZAKI 2006, Pl. 6.31:1,2,3,4,10).

²⁰ GARFINKLE 1999.

²¹ The close typological relations between Wadi Rabah and Halaf are known for a long time (KAPLAN 1958, 1960). Halaf influences and vessels with elaborate decoration in Halaf style are also clearly evident at the junction between northern Mesopotamia and the Levant at sites like Mersin phases XIX-XVII (GARGSTANG 1953, p. 115).

contemporary with each other.²² On the contrary, their similarities with the Ubaid repertoire could seem unexpected because of the general consensus about the fact that both the Wadi Rabah and the Halaf are more ancient than the first appearance of the Ubaid horizon. This provides an additional confirmation to a very ancient dating of the first Ubaid manifestations in the North.

3. Trench C at Logardan: A stratified evidence from the northern Zagros Piedmont

This early emergence of the Ubaid is documented at several sites, as Khirbet esh-Shenef,²³ Tell Turlu,²⁴ Domuztepe,²⁵ and also at Logardan, in the central Iraqi region of the western Qara Dagh. After two surveys in 2014 and 2015, a French archaeological mission (directed by Régis Vallet) started in 2015 a micro-regional program of excavations at the sites of Gird-i Qalaa and Logardan, close to Chamchamal. Both the sites yielded extensive evidences of important (in some cases monumental) chalcolithic vestiges.²⁶ But since the sixth millennium, the Halaf-Ubaid transition is well documented in the basal levels of the Trench C at Logardan (fig. 3).

The deepest level (Level 9) is composed of two structures, a *tholos* and a rectangular unit, both destroyed by a fire and contemporary to each other since their walls overlapped and were embedded to one another. So, they were one architectural (probably domestic) unit. Levels 8 and 7 are composed of several kilns arranged on different layers. The whole area is characterized by strange Halaf and uncommon Ubaid sherds oddly associated in the same dwelling (fig. 3; Pl. 1).

Level 9, with the circular building and the rectangular burnt structure, shows the whole panoply of the Halaf 'culture': perforated potsherds, spindle whorls, circular ceramic discs, coarse flattened-

²² CAMPBELL 2007.

²³ AKKERMANS, WITTMAN 1993.

²⁴ BRENIQUET 1991.

²⁵ CAMPBELL, FLETCHER 2010.

²⁶ VALLET ET AL. 2017.

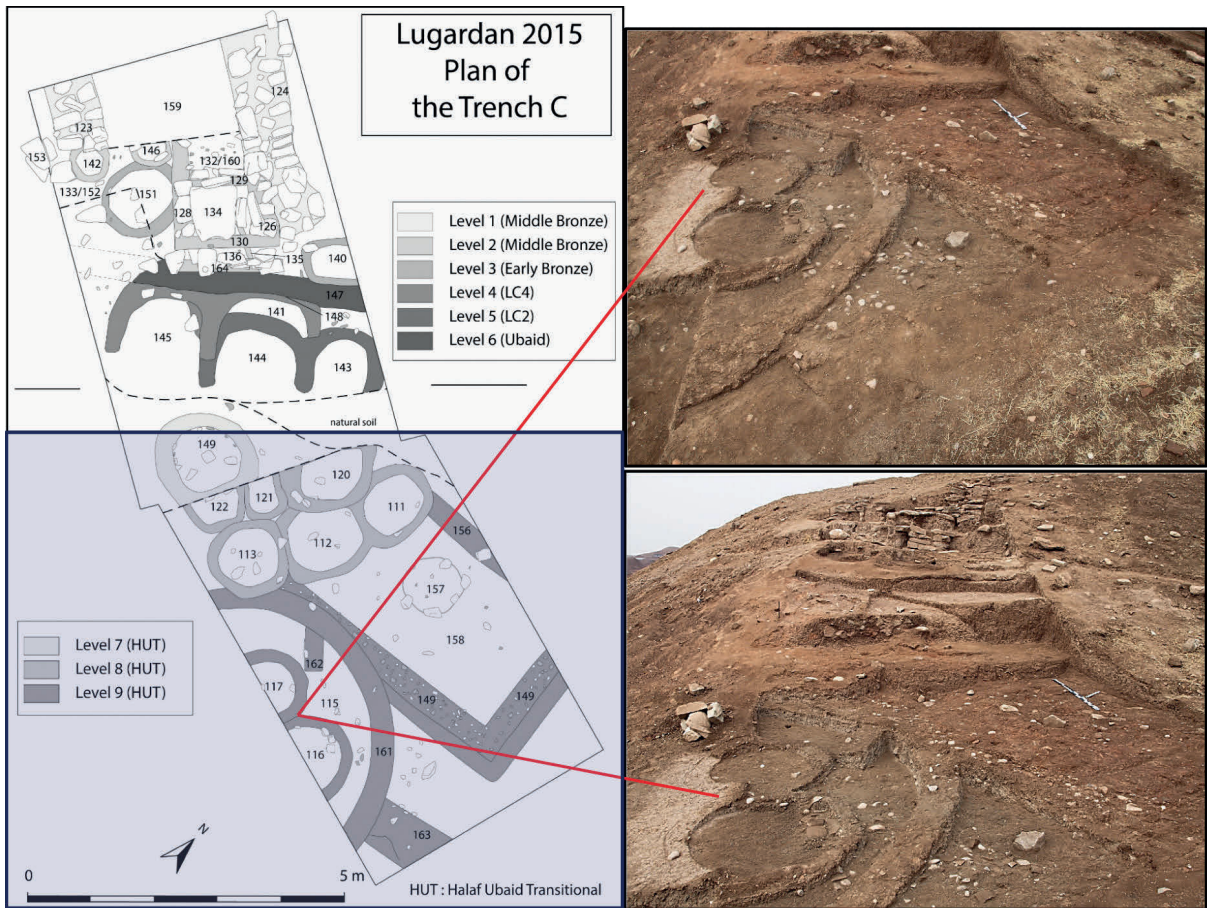


FIGURE 3
Trench C at Lugardan: plan and photos of Levels 9-7 (Halaf-Ubaid Transition)

base basins, miniature stone vessels, fine painted wares, orange (sometimes painted) common pottery, a roughly conical figurine and a rounded *tholos*. Therefore, there should be no doubt about the cultural affiliation of this phase. But since this level the ceramic assemblage is characterized by some anomalous features. In particular, 12% of the collected sherds show proper Ubaid attributes, as black-on-buff dense mineral fabrics, geometric designs and morphologies not consistent with the Halaf typology, as hemispherical bowls with in-turned rims and shallow bowls with beaded rims (Pl. 1). Moreover, Ubaid-looking and Halaf-looking ceramics share some motifs, such as the 'Maltese cross' which is documented both on Halaf red painted sherds and Ubaid black painted ceramics (Pl.1 – Log 15.34.12).

Even proper Halaf sherds do not belong to a standard repertoire. They are both red-on-orange, black-on-orange and polychrome-painted (black, orange, white and purple), with a predominance of red decorations. Their morphological typology includes tall necked everted rim jars, bow rim jars, wide mouth globular pots with everted rims, S-shaped bowls with flared rims and simple hemispherical or everted rim bowls. Even if clearly fitting with a generic Halaf horizon, it does not coincide with the repertoire traditionally considered as 'final' Halaf, which could justify the presence of Ubaid pottery and a transition to the proper Ubaid.

More in general, in the large debate about Halaf chronology and evolution, in the absence of a consensus on the Halaf ceramic typology, sometimes Halaf assemblages are considered 'late' just because

Logardan

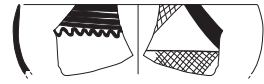
Plate 1



Log 15.21.5



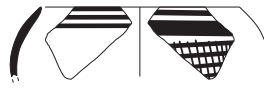
Log 15.24.18



Log 15.34.6



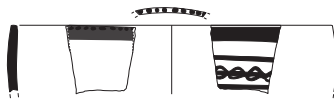
Log 15.34.16



Log 15.38.2



Log 15.24.17



Log 15.27.1



Log 15.21.17



Log 15.19.3



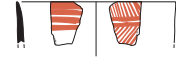
Log 15.34.4



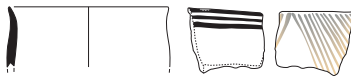
Log 15.24.15



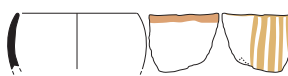
Log 15.19.5



Log 15.34.10



Log 15.21.22



Log 15.24.5



Log 15.24.2



Log 15.20.2



Log 15.24.9



Log 15.19.2



Log 15.34.15



Log 15.34.9



Log 15.34.11



Log 15.34.12



Log 15.34.13



Log 15.34.17



Log 15.38.1



PLATE 1
Halaf-Ubaid Transitional sherds from Logardan Trench C Levels 9-7

of the presence of some Ubaid sherds. Because of a largely accepted ‘culturalist’ perspective dealing with the Halaf and the Ubaid as two ‘cultures’ (namely two homogeneous packages appearing and developing one after the other), a transitional pattern of the ceramic assemblage is sometimes considered as an evidence sufficient to define a Halaf repertoire ‘late’ or ‘final’ just because of the presence of some Ubaid sherds.²⁷ It happens even when the transitional Halaf is very different from the well dated (on the basis of radiocarbon dates) late Halaf.²⁸

Indeed, in Trench C Level 9 at Logardan, the presence of some rare polychrome decorations, some fragments of ‘rusticated’ (or finger nails impressed) ware and bow rim jars seem to suggest a quite late Halaf phase. But, at the same time, final Halaf typology is characterized by miniature zoomorphic and anthropomorphic vessels, or footed vessels, which are absent, and the carinated so-called ‘cream-bowls’ – another hallmark of the late Halaf – are very rare (just one sample). Moreover, a non-negligible quantity of sherds shows very simple linear geometric motifs (Pl.1 – Log.15.19.5; Log.15.34.10; Log.15.34.13; Log.15.34.15; Log.15.38.1), considered as typical of the proto-Halaf and early Halaf phases Tell Halula or Chagar Bazar, in northern Syria.²⁹

It is evident that both Halaf-related and Ubaid-related sherds fit with a very early phase, characterized by linear decorations similar to the so-called Choga Mami Transitional pattern in central and southern Mesopotamia,³⁰ especially in the Hamrin Valley, at Tell Songor and Tell Abada.³¹ All these features are consistent with an early Halaf phase,³² with the Ubaid 1-2 tradition (the beginning of the Ubaid in the South)³³ and even with Early / Early Middle Susiana Phases at Choga Mish.³⁴

This kind of intertwining is also documented

²⁷ GÓMEZ-BACH 2017, pp. 38, 40.

²⁸ CRUELLS 2017.

²⁹ CRUELLS 2017, fig. 2.6.

³⁰ OATES 1969, 1960b.

³¹ JASIM 1985, fig. 98.b-c, 107.d, 108, 109.

³² CRUELLS 2017.

³³ JASIM 1985; OATES 1960a.

³⁴ ALIZADEH 2008.

in the Zagros Piedmont, in the region around the Dukan Lake (districts of Rania, Bngrd and Peshdar) surveyed since 2012 by the French archaeological mission at the Governorate of Sulaymaniyah (MAFGS – directed by J. Giraud). Some technical hybridizations – with the same paste for different decorative styles – are evident and affect both the pastes and the stylistic decorations and imply contacts between Samarra, Halaf and early Ubaid entities.³⁵ Decorative styles and technical hybridizations recalling the ‘Choga-Mami Transitional’ entity in central Iraq have also been recently recorded close to al-Habja, in north-eastern Iraqi Kurdistan.³⁶ This kind of combination between early Ubaid and other early sixth millennium entities would not be particularly surprising in central Mesopotamia, but the Dukan Lake or the al-Habja area are located hundreds of kilometers further north.

Anyway, in Trench C at Logardan the Halaf-Ubaid Transition goes on in Levels 8 and 7, with an increasing percentage of black-on-buff Ubaid ceramics. Since Level 8, the Halaf-related red painted decorations become extremely rare. Some material-cultural elements, like the presence of little stone vessels and pierced potsherds, are still attested in the Level 7. But orange common ware dramatically decreases in number and, even if some motifs are long-lasting (above all the ‘Maltese cross’), the ceramic typology and the set of painted decorations are more and more consistent with a ‘mature’ Ubaid horizon, closely similar to Tell Abada Phase II.³⁷ This is the same process of acculturation already stressed both for ceramics and other material cultural elements at Tepe Gawra XIX-XVII.³⁸

At Logardan, this dynamic of acculturation is also evident from the point of view of the ceramic techniques (fig. 4). In Level 9, Ubaid-like and Halaf-like ceramics did not share any technical feature. Their pastes were different and Halaf pottery was manufactured by slab construction or by hol-

³⁵ BALDI 2018.

³⁶ ALTAWHEEL ET AL. 2012, p. 24, fig. 10.6-9.

³⁷ JASIM 1985, fig. 176, 179, 180, 190.e.

³⁸ STEIN 2010, fig. 2.6. Recent large-scale typologies have similarly shown a progressive transformation of the morpho-stylistic Halaf repertoire towards shapes and decorations typical of the Ubaid period (ROBERT 2010).

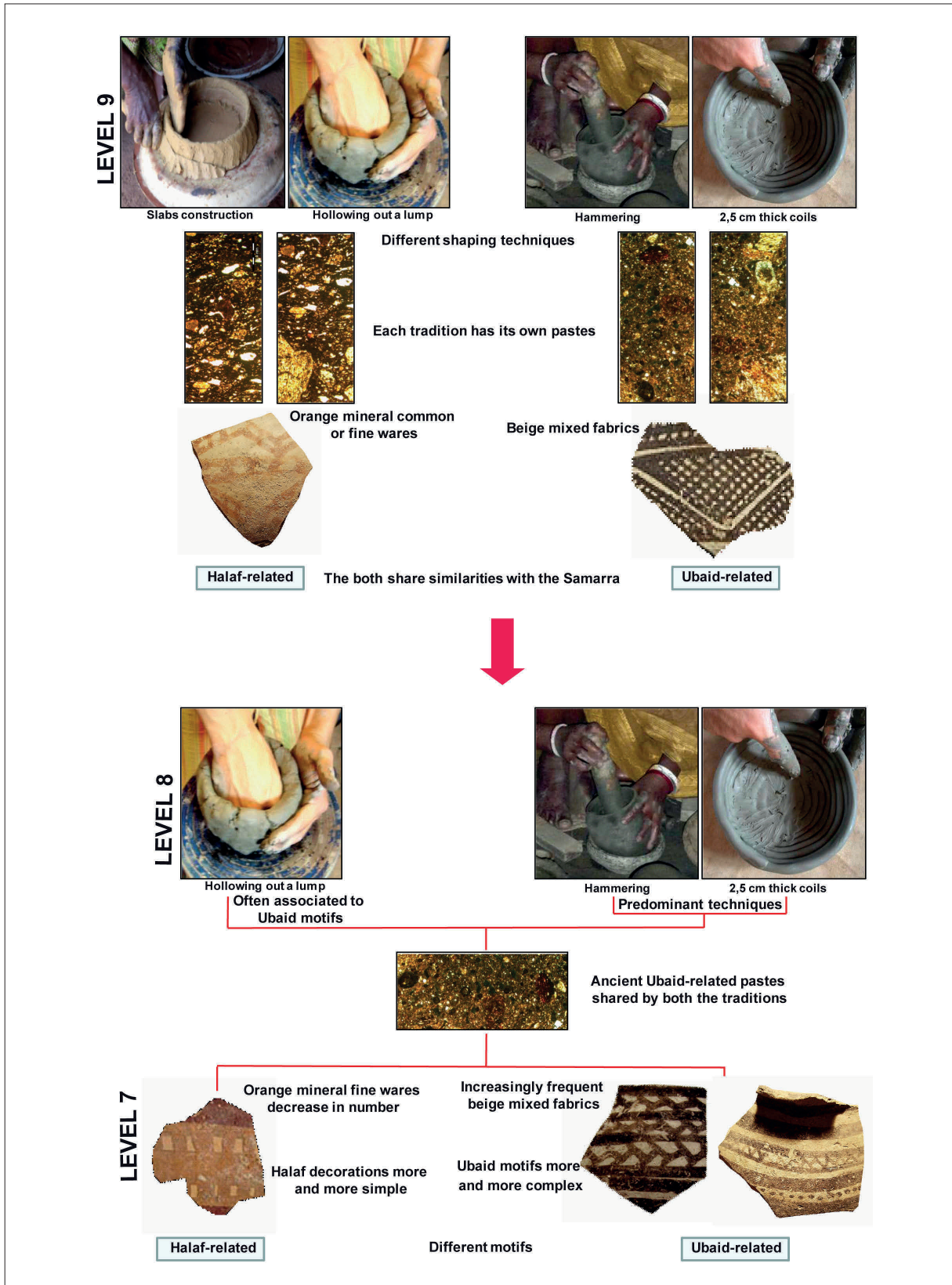


FIGURE 4
Process of techno-petrographic acculturation of the ceramics at Logardan Trench C Levels 9-7

lowing-out a lump of clay, while Ubaid ceramics were made by hammering on a convex support or by overlapping 2,5 cm thick coils. Later, in Level 8, Ubaid pastes start to be shared, and eventually, in Level 7, the Ubaid shaping methods become predominant, and more and more ceramics produced by hollowing-out a lump (that is a Halaf-related shaping method) start using typical black-on-buff Ubaid-related painted motifs (fig. 4).³⁹

4. A far-from-home Ubaid

A quite similar scenario is documented in the Lebanese region, very far from the area traditionally considered as the Ubaid cultural sphere. A research program the Ifpo-Beirut is carrying-out since 2015 with the Museum of Lebanese Prehistory (Université Saint Joseph in Beirut), implies a technical analysis of ceramic assemblages originating from ancient surface collections and excavations. Several assemblages show, since a very early phase, some traces of the evolutionary patterns observed in Mesopotamia, within the Ubaid cultural area. Some smaller sites show just some early Ubaid black-on-buff painted ceramics, while main villages in the coastal area,⁴⁰ in the Beqaa valley⁴¹ and on the central mountains⁴² are characterized not only by a presence of Mesopotamian traditions, but also by the same kind of evolution observed at Logardan, with an intertwining between local ceramic productions and Ubaid-related pottery (Pl. 2).⁴³

³⁹ The technical analysis of the Halaf-Ubaid transitional ceramics of Logardan is still ongoing and takes into account not only pottery from Trench C, but also from surface collections from Logardan (especially the northern edge of the hill) and Gird-i Qalaa. For a first assessment of the technical traits of the ceramics as far as pastes and shaping methods see BALDI 2015.

⁴⁰ As Khalde I-II, el-Heri and the agglomeration of sites known as the *Sables de Beirut*.

⁴¹ As 'Ain el-Ghassil, 'Ain asch-Shamal or Tell Ayoub.

⁴² As the Mount Sannine, Bikfaya or Baabdat.

⁴³ A clear example of these dynamics is represented by the site of Qleiaat, in the Mount Lebanon, investigated between 2015 and 2017 by a joint project led by the Ifpo and the Museum of Lebanese Prehistory. Final results of the excavations will be published in the next months according to the agreement of the Lebanese General Directorate of the Antiquities. The main tell of Qleiaat is occupied by massive architec-

Although the Ubaid pottery in the Levant has always been considered as limited to northern sites as Tell Kurdu⁴⁴ and Ras Shamra⁴⁵, black-on-buff painted ceramics in the Lebanese area are characterized by the same distinctive traits observed in the whole Ubaid sphere: a quite restricted set of geometric or stylized motifs arranged in horizontal bands, dense mineral fabrics, medium dimensions and decorations usually visible on the upper part of the vessels. This kind of wares have been noticed for the first time in the northern Beqaa Valley at the site of Tell Ard Tlaili,⁴⁶ where Mesopotamian-related painted traditions are documented since the Dark-Faced-Burnished Ware phase, at the beginning of the sixth millennium BC. These foreign wares represent a minority of the assemblage, where local productions obviously occupy a quantitative predominant position. Nevertheless, Mesopotamian-related ceramics are not mere occasional imports. On the contrary, they are a long-lasting presence deeply involved in local cultural dynamics. Indeed, the collections conserved at the Museum of Lebanese Prehistory, suggest a series of technostylistic borrowings between different traditions

tures dating back to the Early Bronze II-III phases, while the sixth millennium sequence is known from deep soundings. During a first phase, some rare black-on buff Ubaid-like painted sherds appear associated to an early chalcolithic Wadi Rabah-related local assemblage, as well as to some Halaf sherds. Initially, each of these three components of the assemblage show specific pastes and Ubaid specimens seem to have very ancient decorations. Moreover, local ceramics and Halaf sherds share their manufacturing techniques, which are well attested in the whole area since the Pottery Neolithic: they are built by hollowing-out a lump of clay or by superposing 4,5 cm thick coils with an alternating orientation of the junctions. On the other hand, all the Ubaid samples are built by superposing 2,5 cm thick coils with inward oriented junctions: a very simple technique never documented before in the region. Later, in a second phase, Halaf sherds tend to disappear, the Ubaid ones become more frequent and decorated according to some typical Ubaid 3 patterns. Besides, despite their beige colour due to an oxidizing firing, in this phase Ubaid ceramics are locally manufactured and share the same pastes of the rest of the assemblage. Likewise, Ubaid pottery also shares some local shapes, in particular bow-rim jars. The 2,5 cm thick coils technique continues to be used to shape Ubaid containers, but this method is no longer exclusive to the Ubaid ceramics, but it is also used to build about 16% of the local chalcolithic assemblage.

⁴⁴ ÖZBAL ET AL. 2004.

⁴⁵ DE CONTENSON 1992.

⁴⁶ KIRKBRIDE 1969.

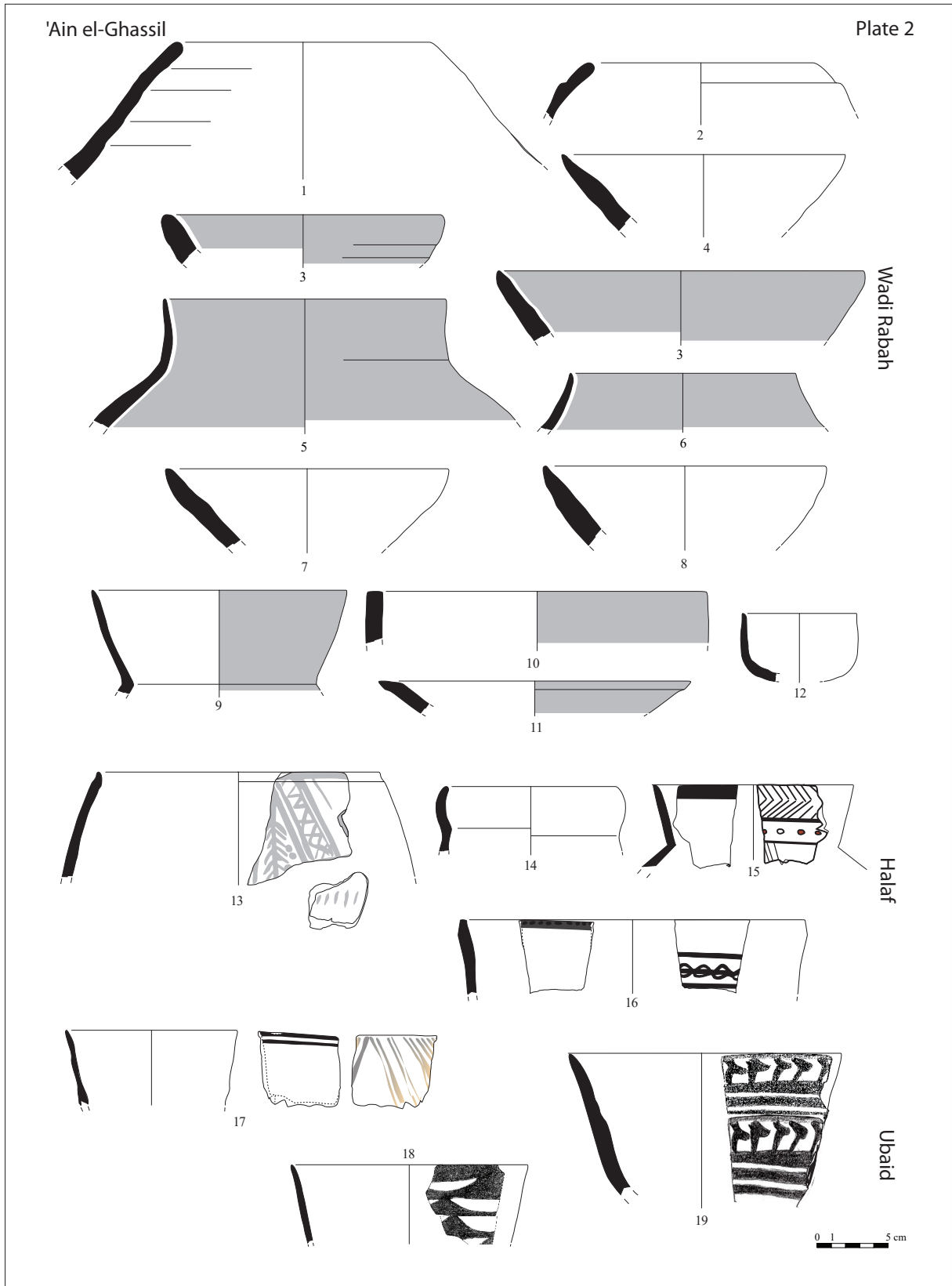


PLATE 2

'Ain el-Ghassil Early Chalcolithic assemblage: 1-12 Wadi Rabah sherds; 13-16 Halaf sherds; 17-19 Early Ubaid sherds

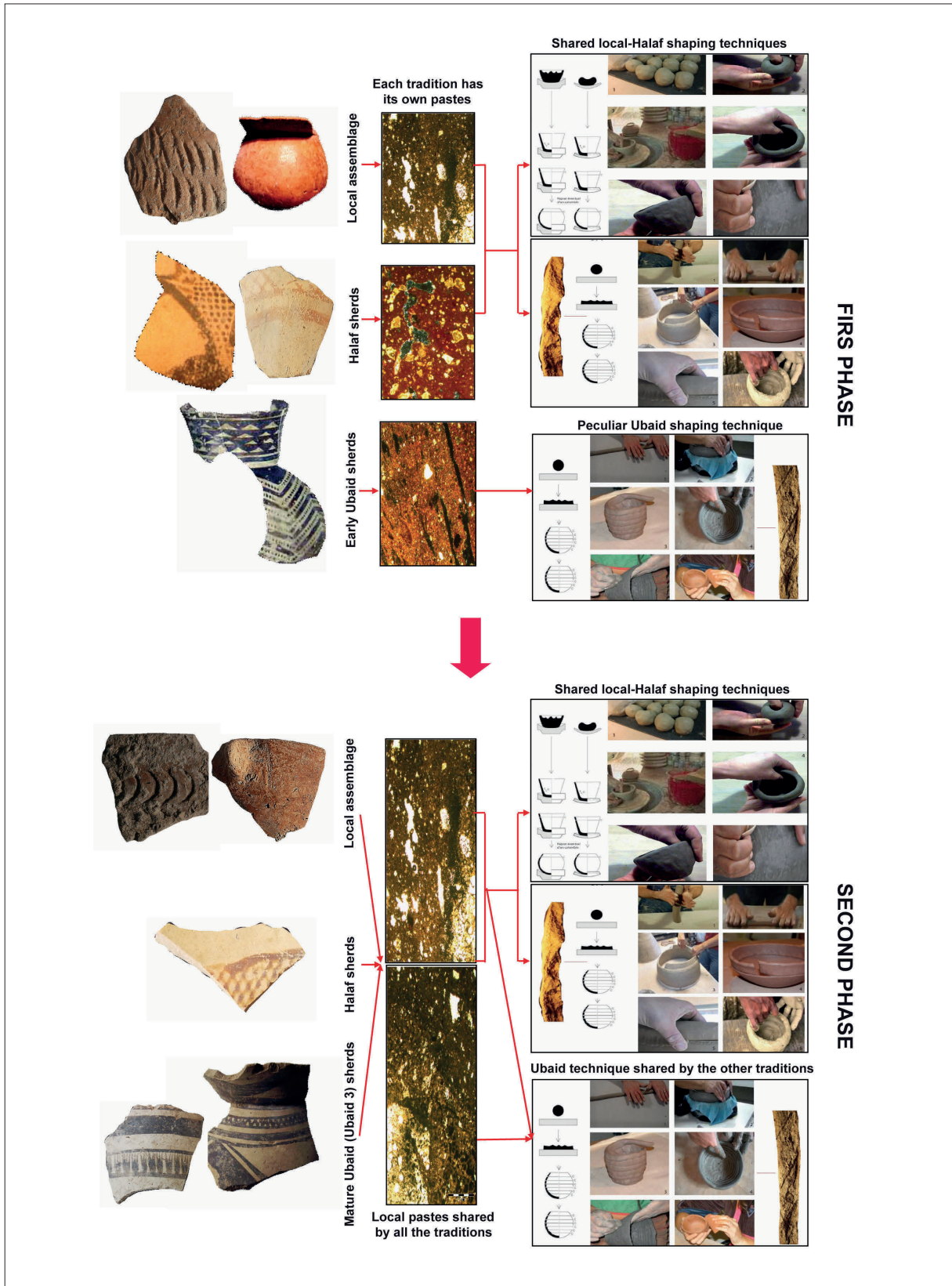


FIGURE 5
Acculturation pattern of ceramic techniques at Lebanese sites with Ubaid presence

over a period of some centuries. Using stratified sequences (as Qleiaat or Tell Ard Tlaili) to verify this kind of evolution observed on assemblages from ancient surveys, it appears that since a very early phase Halaf and Ubaid painted shards are recorded within Levantine late Dark-Faced-Burnished or Wadi Rabah-related assemblages (fig. 5). First, local and foreign traditions do not present any kind of similarities. But over time several intertwinements emerge: fabrics become more and more homogeneous, some shapes are progressively shared, and some decorative styles blend together. As far as shapes, fine bowls with little-beaded rims first occur exclusively in black-on buff early Ubaid-like wares, while later they are also adopted amongst local red-slipped productions.⁴⁷ Bow-rim jars, which are initially typical of Wadi Rabah or Halaf repertoires and then also spread amongst Ubaid ceramics, constitute an even more evident example in this sense. On the other hand, bichrome painted decorations (red and black on buff fabrics) seem to emerge as the product of a stylistic borrowing between distinctive Halaf red designs and Ubaid black motifs, as already documented in the Amuq Valley.⁴⁸ The earliest bichrome specimens closely recall the Halaf fine tradition, while later they become increasingly common and associated to new and less elaborate motifs as the typically Ubaid wavy lines.

It is remarkable that this late bichrome version (that summarizes Ubaid and Halaf traits, and could be the result of a long coexistence of these two traditions along with purely local productions) is the one attested in some southern-Levantine sites, as Kataret as-Samra⁴⁹ or Tel Tsaf.⁵⁰ It is totally coherent, therefore, that some reliable south-Levantine radiocarbon dates attribute bichrome painted Ubaid-like materials to the last quarter of the sixth millennium BC.⁵¹

⁴⁷ See for instance at Tell Ard Tlaili since a period contemporary to the Amuq Phase D (BADRESHANY 2013, fig. 3.22.4).

⁴⁸ See for instance at Tell Kurdu (BRAIDWOOD R. J., BRAIDWOOD L. 1960).

⁴⁹ LEONARD 1989, pp. 4-6.

⁵⁰ GOPHNA, SADEH 1988, p. 10.

⁵¹ GARFINKEL ET AL. 2007.

5. Conclusions

Even if available data are still meagre in the Levant, it seems that Ubaid pottery appears very early in the Lebanese area and actively participated in local cultural dynamics.⁵² It is not surprising that, given the distance from Mesopotamia, this tradition represents a minority of the assemblage in Lebanon. But both in northern Mesopotamia and in the northern Levant Ubaid pottery is involved in a series of technical borrowings with other components of the ceramic horizon and, above all, with local productions. These long and deep processes are not limited to superficial characters and determine intertwining and reciprocal transformations between distinct traditions. The natural consequence of these exchanges is that, as Stein has already pointed out,⁵³ the apparent large-scale homogeneity of the Ubaid repertoire is, in fact, the result of the emergence of several local Ubaid assemblages strongly characterized by local elements depending on the various regions.

It seems to me that the archaeological record from the Zagros Piedmont, Logardan and the Lebanese area is not a mere clue of a culture-contact phenomenon, but rather an evidence that calls into question the very definition of Halaf, Ubaid or Wadi Rabah 'cultures' and their reciprocal relations. The degree of intertwining between these entities is certainly higher than previously imagined, also because in all probability their cultural and territorial relationships begin much earlier than hitherto believed. Despite obvious regional differences at Logardan, in Lebanon, but also at Tell Kudu in the Amuq, or at Tepe Gawra in the Mosul region, local versions of the Ubaid seem to emerge from a very early intertwining between cultural entities one cannot consider as monolithic 'cultures'. In this sense, it is interesting that ceramic techniques underline what has already been observed on the ba-

⁵² A very significant example in this sense is represented by Tell Kurdu (ÖZBAL 2010). Despite the genetic continuity of the inhabitants, the transition from Phase C to Phase E implies a sharp discontinuity in terms of architecture, funeral practices, coroplastics and production systems, and clearly shows the cultural impact that small Ubaid groups can have exercised on an entire community in the long run.

⁵³ STEIN, ÖZBAL 2007; STEIN 2010, p. 24.

sis of other cultural traits,⁵⁴ namely the need to no longer approach the Ubaid or the Halaf as collective entities, but rather to deconstruct and investigate their local elements and internal mechanisms.⁵⁵

Moreover, the reassessment of radiocarbon dates, of the regional pottery typologies, as well as new data raise a question: it is possible that the Ubaid expansion towards the North and the Levant had begun during the Ubaid 1-2 (at the beginning of the sixth millennium) rather than during the Ubaid 3? It is a fact that Ubaid 3 and 4 phases have been a period of continuous expansion of the Ubaid sphere, with the foundation of many settlements and villages both in the Gulf and in the North. But a scenario implying the beginning of this process since the Ubaid 1-2 could offer a solution for the problems aroused by the models currently in use for

the Ubaid expansion. On the one hand, A Halaf-Ubaid Transition (or a contact between Wadi Rabad and Ubaid) conceived as local processes, without any 'contact zone', but rather due to regional interactions between Halaf people and small Ubaid groups could explain the absence of chronological gaps between the supposed main 'contact area' and the rest of the North. It could also explain the subsequent emergence of the Ubaid as a regionalized entity, with strong local specificities. On the other hand, if this interaction had begun during Ubaid 1, this could explain why the Ubaid horizon was already spread throughout the North around 5300 BC.

Further studies and fieldworks will be able to answer these questions only in a comparative supra-regional perspective between Mesopotamia and the Levant.

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⁵⁴ STEIN, ÖZBAL 2007; STEIN 2010; ÖZBAL 2010, p. 299, 304; CARTER, PHILIP 2010b.

⁵⁵ In a similar way, with respect to the strongly local and yet typically Ubaid characteristics of Kenan Tepe, (PARKER 2010, p. 357), after having discussed separately small finds, ceramics and architecture, concludes that the specific local version of the Ubaid was the product of variably interconnected and overlapping Anatolian and Mesopotamian social networks.

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