

# The Urkesh Mittani Horizon: Ceramic Evidence

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## 1. The Mittani horizon at Urkesh

At the heart of the Mittani period excavations at Tell Mozan, ancient Urkesh, is the monumental temple terrace with the wide plaza in front and various structures associated with it. The Temple Terrace had very deep roots: starting in the fourth millennium, in the LC 3 period, there was already a niched building set on top of a terrace of 23 meters above the surrounding plain, most likely an early version of the Temple BA. And at the base of this temple terrace we found an LC 3 revetment wall that was already then bordering the terrace on the south and linking it to a plaza in front of it.

We then have evidence for ED II architecture in this area in the form of an early stairway connecting the plaza and the terrace. Much more evidence is associated with the ED III temple terrace and the Temple BA constructed on its large flat summit (Fig.1).

The close connection of the ED III footprint of the terrace and its enclosing revetment wall with its LC 3 antecedent is very significant, because they were all used for sacral purposes. The ED III evidence, in particular, is extraordinarily well preserved as the stone revetment wall still was standing with its top in place even in Mittani times:<sup>1</sup> no later intrusions damaged the monumental staircase, the revetment wall or the plaza. The stratigraphy of the plaza is clear: the Mittani strata came to rest directly on the ED III strata, as is made clear by the fact that we have ED III sherds mixed with Mittani ceramics.<sup>2</sup> To the east of the ED III monumental stairway and immediately bordering it was a small stone wall flanked on the south by two obelisks (Figs. 1 and 2), and immediately to the east of it we excavated a series of structures which may have been service buildings for the temple. These buildings span the intervening periods between ED III and the early Mittani period, with a regular series of accumulations there.<sup>3</sup> Undoubtedly, the plaza was also in continuous use during these same periods, but there is no trace of later

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<sup>1</sup> Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2014, 443.

<sup>2</sup> Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2014, 445–448.

<sup>3</sup> Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2014, 445.

accumulations on it. In other words, while the plaza was kept clean during this long time span, the area to the east of the staircase was progressively built up: it was a center of a variety of activities, probably connected with the temple functions.<sup>4</sup>

Differently than the situation from ED III on, when the overall conditions of the Terrace and the Plaza remained stable, the situation during the Mittani period was a rapidly changing one.<sup>5</sup> At some point in the early Mittani period the buildings to the east of the staircase were abandoned and a massive brickfall coming from the mud brick buildings on the east inundated the area. The brickfall eventually covered the stairway to its mid section and even covered the revetment wall almost to its very top. This collapse was a major change in the city and its relationship to the temple terrace. Throughout its long history the city with its administration and residents had contributed a vast amount of economic and psychological energy to maintain the temple terrace complex and the associated plaza.

In a completely different setting, we gained direct experience of what such psychological energy might mean: during the war in Syria which began in March 2011. Throughout this long period, our expedition has protected the excavated parts of the plaza, the temple on top of the terrace, the revetment wall and monumental staircase from the climate, especially from the great amount of rain that falls in this part of Syria; apart from the direct damage done by the water, this means that plants grow abundantly even between the stones of the monumental stairway, apron and the revetment wall.<sup>6</sup> Also these areas need protection not only from newly established plants but also from burrowing animals such as foxes and birds. How does this relate to the collapse I described for the late Mittani period? For the ancient inhabitants of Urkesh this massive collapse meant that the continuity of their central religious complex, that had existed and characterized the city for more than a millennium, was broken. A physical and psychological impact that the city and those who remained would never recover from.

To the extent possible, the city and its inhabitants reacted positively, in the Mittani period, to this new situation. Positively in the sense that the space was reorganized by introducing, for the first time in two thousand years, the first radical change in the approach axis to the summit: the focus of activities now shifted

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<sup>4</sup> It is my pleasure to dedicate these considerations about the archaeological evidence for the Mittani period in Mozan/Urkesh to Stefano de Martino who has always so cogently demonstrated the historical importance of the Hurrians. The results of our excavations at Urkesh have brought us together often over the years, and for his unflinching support and interest I am most grateful.

<sup>5</sup> For the overall situation near the Temple Terrace see Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2005, 30–37 and 40, Buccellati 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Even during ancient periods of climate fluctuation these areas had to be protected from sun damage and wind, even if the large amount of present rainfall (over 400 ml yearly) was considerably less.

to the west where a new staircase was built giving access to the top of the terrace from that portion of the city that had remained immune to the great collapse in the east. However, since the mound was higher in this area, the staircase was not a major constructional challenge, nor was it as monumental as in the past, as only five steps were needed (Fig. 3). In the east, some of the upper stones of the staircase were dislodged and a new extension of the original apron that had been constructed in ED III was made to the west, but much coarser than the original. Clearly, the old staircase no longer functioned as the main entryway to the glacis at the top of the terrace. We think that a temple stood on the top of the summit in Mittani times as well, but we have no evidence of it because the levels available for excavations were all of the early periods, the later ones having been eroded on account of their position at the very top of what is now the tell.

Because of the historical development at Urkesh that I have just traced, the excavated Mittani period ceramics are much more numerous in the Temple area than that of the Akkadian or Khabur periods. This means that the ceramic catalog is fuller and more varied. The contexts include, in addition to the Temple terrace, the buildings immediately to the west of the terrace, flanking the new entrance, principally in excavation unit A18. Presumably this area now contained service quarters for this continuing ritual context, replacing those earlier structures to the east. It is to this abundant ceramic material that we will turn now our attention.

## 2. Vessel shapes<sup>7</sup>

The overall shapes made in the Mittani period in Mozan are more varied than in any other period and the details of the shapes are more articulated.<sup>8</sup> For this reason there are a number of variations listed under the type number of many of the shapes: for example, the bowl type bcra 813<sup>9</sup> includes five variations which are illustrated in the Urkesh Global Record side by side.<sup>10</sup> The differences among these five examples center on the position of the carination (see Figs. 4-5), the rim diameter and the sharpness of the carination. The type of necked jars, so numerous in the Khabur period, are less frequent now with hole mouth jars (Fig. 6) and shouldered jars (Fig. 7) becoming more prevalent; some few jar shapes are very small and have handles from rim to body (Fig. 8) or large tab handles (Fig. 9). Drinking vessels have changed in that footed goblets (Fig. 10) are now the standard although cylindrical vessels and the relatively minor number of conical

<sup>7</sup> Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2014 Fig. 5 shows statistics from some important Mittani features in J1 and J5 totaling 1,331 shape sherds.

<sup>8</sup> [urkesh.org/cer-hz-mittani](http://urkesh.org/cer-hz-mittani).

<sup>9</sup> This shape code expanded is bowl/carinated/sharp carination. For the expanded list of all Mozan shape codes see [urkesh.org/cer-cat-sh](http://urkesh.org/cer-cat-sh).

<sup>10</sup> The Urkesh Global Record is the digital publication of the data from the excavations. It is available at [www.urkesh.org](http://www.urkesh.org), where one should look especially at the digital book on Ceramics ([urkesh.org/cer](http://urkesh.org/cer)).

cups in the corpus were probably also used for drinking. Some of the smaller shapes categorized under pots (Fig. 11) may also have been employed for the same purpose. The so-called red edge bowls and plates are common in the period.

### 3. Decoration

In the corpus there are a large number of painted Mittani sherds. In this period painted designs can decorate any ware<sup>11</sup> or shape but cooking vessels in Pebble Tempered ware (P ware) were not decorated. As shown in the extensive Brak corpus of Mittani ceramics, some shapes and painted designs from the later Old Babylonian period are still produced in the Mittani period; these include drip marks, and solid bands of varying widths. Although J. Oates and others continue to use the term Khabur ware for this type of ceramics produced in the Mittani period, here they are all classified Mittani and the ware types are categorized separately.<sup>12</sup>

#### 3.1 Geometric motifs

During the Mittani period we have the widest variety of designs combining both geometric and representational patterns. Although painted designs are more prevalent, incised designs and deep ribbing patterns also occur among the Mittani period decoration types. Rope decoration occurs by itself and occasionally can be combined with painted bands. However, it is unusual to have incisions or ribbing combined with painted bands.

For the most part Mittani decoration types in Urkesh are designs painted on buff-colored ceramics with dark paint but occasionally the paint is red or a combination of both because of firing conditions (see below). The geometric designs include parallel stripes of varying widths, some connected with wide solidly painted areas. A checkerboard design of alternating black and white rectangles is quite common (Fig. 12). Additionally, geometric designs can include running triangles filled with a variety of patterns, or a hatched band (Fig. 13) encircling the body of the vessel. Rims can be covered with solid paint or can have a series of short parallel strokes either all around the rim or arranged in discrete groups (Fig. 14); rims can also be decorated with hatching or covered with a series of running triangles. Drip marks as a short series of dots or in a short line, usually diagonal, can be found on the exterior or interior of jars and deep bowls. Painted decoration types are commonest on footed goblets and deep bowls; the deep bowls are in any case a large shape category in this period.<sup>13</sup> The painted designs on these bowls often show painted bands of various widths and solidly painted or patterned rims.

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<sup>11</sup> Thus the term Nuzi ware is not applicable in our system.

<sup>12</sup> Oates et al. 1997, 66–77.

<sup>13</sup> Also known as “grain measure” vessels.

### 3.2 Plant and animal motifs

Painted designs of plants and animals, especially birds, usually in white paint over a dark band encircling the vessel near the rim are characteristic for the painted decoration. Deep bowls and cups with a cylindrical shape can have one or more bands with birds painted in white on the solid band (Fig. 15); a combination of geometric and naturalistic designs. Occasionally these figures can be white painted birds on a red background but this must be due to the firing, not the paint recipe, as we have vessels where both occur (Fig. 16). In addition to birds in Urkesh, we excavated a portion of a bowl with a fish and a water pattern (Fig. 17). Another unique motif is a large horned animal<sup>14</sup> (Fig. 18). A bowl decorated on two registers has what appears to be a sun symbol in a panel in the top register and below a plant with possibly a fish tail and the head of a bird (Fig. 19).

## 4. Ware types

Basically the wares used in the Mittani period are a continuation of the developmental path of the wares employed for most of the third millennium, and continuing into the second millennium as late as the Middle Assyrian period. In the Mittani period, in general for all the wares, the size of the tempering inclusions are more varied and the firing is more uneven. If we look at only the two major wares, chaff temper (CH) and red calcite (RC), we note that vessels made in CH ware have a buff interior and exterior but are characterized by the large amount of sand added to the usual chaff temper base (Fig. 20). In one of the variants the vessels are not as highly fired as previously (Fig. 21).<sup>15</sup> RC ware can exhibit the usual “sandwich” effect of the firing but this is more present in the Mittani period in the finer shapes (Fig. 22). Also in RC ware we find sand as an important temper. Additionally, we see more size variation in the calcite inclusions (Fig. 23). Interestingly, even though the potter went to great length to add the painted decoration on the exterior of some vessels, the tempering was not sufficiently attended to so that there can be rehydrated calcite nodules breaking up the surface.

## 5. Ware, decoration and shape intersections

As in all periods some shapes are envisioned by the Urkesh potters as appropriately made in only one ware type while other shapes can be constructed in a variety of wares. In all periods the cooking ware (P ware) vessels have a limited range since cooking vessels are more efficient in a restricted shape and ware range. Small vessels are usually made in fine wares and this is true for the goblets produced in the Mittani period. Footed goblets and cups<sup>16</sup> are usually made in

<sup>14</sup> See horned animals in Oates et al. 1997, Fig. 200: 456.

<sup>15</sup> [urkesh.org/cer-cat-w-bc](http://urkesh.org/cer-cat-w-bc).

<sup>16</sup> [urkesh.org/cer-hz-mittani-cups](http://urkesh.org/cer-hz-mittani-cups).

Fine Chaff ware (FC) and mostly painted in bands; in some cases birds, geometric or plant motifs can be painted in white over the dark bands.

Jars and deep bowls tend to be made in CH ware; necked jars may have a solid dark painted neck or rope decoration at the base of the neck. The combinations of ware, decoration and shape are also clear in the category of hole mouth jars usually made in CH ware; the upper body near the rim often has a painted or ribbed decoration. Deep bowls are very similar to hole mouth jars in the sense that they are prevalently made in CH ware and when decorated have the painted designs or ribbing on the upper part of the body. As in the preceding Khabur period the tops of rims can be painted. In the Mittani period this occurs rarely in jars and pots. However, in all types of bowls and especially deep bowls, we can have the rims painted with parallel striped bands, running triangles, or dotted rhomboids. Handles are painted in dark paint with a white design when the upper part of the vessel has a similar pattern.

When we consider the painted designs, they are carefully painted for the most part and on the smaller vessels neatly done even when the lines are many and thin. In the Mittani period painted designs can include both positive and reserved images indicating that ceramic painters in this period saw positive and negative patterns at the same time. The white images, geometric or based on plant or animal shapes, are in outline form so that there is never any large area of white paint. This is opposed to images, painted with dark paint, which may contain large areas of solid dark paint. This is the case of bands which can be wide or narrow or a combination of both.

## 6. Mittani and Urkesh

### 6.1 The Mittani period

We can now place the evidence we have gained from the ceramic corpus within a broader historical context. We have seen a strong continuity in the Plaza from Late Chalcolithic 3 through the beginning of the Mittani period, a period of over two millennia!<sup>17</sup> We also know that Urkesh was an important political entity in the Akkadian period under king Tupkish, after which it began to lose importance.<sup>18</sup> In the Khabur period we have some information on the relations between Urkesh and the Mari king Zimri-Lim from a few Mari letters,<sup>19</sup> where two

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<sup>17</sup> Buccellati – Kelly-Buccellati 2014.

<sup>18</sup> Buccellati, F. 2010.

<sup>19</sup> Kupper 1998. see the summary of the relations between Urkesh and its people with the servants of Zimri-Lim in [urkesh.org/eLibr-abstr-Kupper](http://urkesh.org/eLibr-abstr-Kupper). For a discussion of the early history of the Hurrian language see Wilhelm 2008, 181: “A safe, though not very exact terminus *ante quem* for the introduction of the Hurrian language in regions west of the upper Euphrates is provided by texts from Kültepe, Mari and Alalakh VII, and the late pre-Sargonic period texts from Ebla mark the terminus *post quem* at least for a significant part of

individuals appear who are called “man of Urkesh,” Terru and Haziran. The local situation in Urkesh is one of hostility toward Terru and others connected with Mari. After this period the transition from the Mari rule in the area of Urkesh to the beginning of the Mittani period is unclear due to the lack of specific evidence for the formation of the Mittani state.<sup>20</sup> S. de Martino begins his discussion of the political history of this period by saying: “The period following the assassination of Muwattalli I is one of the most controversial of the Hittite history.”<sup>21</sup>

Relevant to the early history of Mittani is the fact that the final destruction of Ebla may be attributed to the Hurrians.<sup>22</sup> This hypothesis is interesting because it speaks to the importance of the Hurrians in Syria during this period. While some scholars consider the Mittani state already formed by the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, others argue that the state formed after the reign of the Hittite king Mursili I.<sup>23</sup>

At the peak of Mittani history, Urkesh was located between its two capitals, Waššukanni in the west (possibly Tell Fekheriya)<sup>24</sup> and Taidu in the east (possibly Tell Hamidiyah).<sup>25</sup> These two sites were important in Mittani times and continued to be occupied into the late Middle Assyrian period. Starting from early in Mittani history the area was called Hanigalbat, and considered an independent kingdom and at various times allied with Assyria or the Hittites. Under the last king, Shattuware II, it extended from the Khabur region to the Euphrates.<sup>26</sup> The Assyrian king Salmanassar I (1263-34 BC) defeated him marking the end of the Mittani period as he included the kingdom in the Middle Assyrian state. Thus the Khabur region evolved politically in Middle Assyrian times from vassalage to direct rule.<sup>27</sup>

In Urkesh, after the Khabur period we have only information for early and later Mittani based on our stratigraphic and ceramic evidence. In the plaza area (unit J1) we have, directly on the earliest Mittani floor, a mixture of Khabur-like painted sherds and the classic Mittani painted pottery. We cannot determine whether the pottery painted in bands can be dated to the late Khabur period or are an overlap of ceramic traditions and made in the Mittani period. This floor is antecedent to the brickfall which is overlain with later Mittani pottery, thus the basis

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northern Syria.” For a discussion of the surveys of Middle and Late Bronze sites in the Khabur region see Lyonnet 2000, Lyonnet – Faivre 2014, Kolinski 2014.

<sup>20</sup> For an in-depth discussion of the historical and chronological problems see de Martino 2000, 2004, 2010 and 2014.

<sup>21</sup> De Martino 2010, 186.

<sup>22</sup> *Archi* 2007, 189, de Martino 2014, 66–68 disputes this idea. See also de Martino 2003, 108f.

<sup>23</sup> De Martino 2004, 36, de Martino 2014, 66–69, Beckman 1996, Salvini 2000.

<sup>24</sup> Bonatz et al. 2008, 92, Bonatz 2014, Bonatz 2015, Bartl – Bonatz 2013.

<sup>25</sup> Haas – Wäfler 1990, 69.

<sup>26</sup> Wilhelm 1989, 25, de Martino 2014, 63–64.

<sup>27</sup> Jakob 2015, 177–178.

for our general chronological conclusions.<sup>28</sup>

We know that during his campaign Salmanassar defeated Taidu and went victoriously all the way to the Euphrates. He boasts of burning 180 villages and deporting 14,400 people.<sup>29</sup> Given its proximity to Taidu, Urkesh could have been on his route and some of the deported may have been from the city.<sup>30</sup> The fact that we have no evidence of a massive burning could be attributed to the fact that the city was by now a small sanctuary and therefore not politically or militarily important. But, it could also be that Urkesh had already become so small and unimportant that the Assyrian army did not stop at all at Urkesh on its way to the Euphrates. We do know that when the Assyrians took over the area of the Jazirah they avoided making the site of Urkesh one of their larger settlements.<sup>31</sup> We may well assume then that this was the result of their acknowledgment that the site was so intimately connected for centuries with the Hurrians and a major Hurrian god, Kumarbi. The earlier glory of Urkesh was, we might say, the very reason for its total disappearance from the stage of history.

## 6.2 The end of Urkesh

We thus come to look more closely at what ceramics can tell us about the final century of the history of Urkesh. In the transition from Mittani to the Middle Assyrian period in Urkesh we do not have massive destruction which can be tied to a Middle Assyrian conquest.<sup>32</sup> We know that Taidu and Waššukanni continue in Middle Assyrian times to be important provincial capitals, whereas Urkesh was very soon abandoned. While we have no direct evidence that the temple on the summit was indeed dedicated to Kumarbi, it seems only plausible that this must have been the case. Urkesh remained solidly Hurrian, too Hurrian, we might say, for even the Assyrians to be able to include it in their effort at a full cultural and religious, hence political, integration.

The end of Mittani in Urkesh came slowly with no indication of purposeful destruction of the temple terrace or the constructions connected with it. Neither do we have evidence of later intrusions into the plaza. The city must have been depopulated gradually; the few residents who remained in the late Mittani period attempted as best they could to preserve their centuries old tradition even though to do this they had to make major changes in that tradition.

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<sup>28</sup> For the overall stratigraphic sequence at Urkesh see [urkesh.org/mza-frame](http://urkesh.org/mza-frame).

<sup>29</sup> Grayson 1987, texts A.O.77.1 and 16, Kolinski 2015, 10.

<sup>30</sup> On the use of deported labor see Harrak 1987, 195–205. In the texts from Tell Sabi Abyad the serf laborers had predominantly Hurrian names; they are attributed as coming “from the conquered territories to the north of the Jazirah” (Akkermans – Wiggermann 2015, 119).

<sup>31</sup> Lyonnet 2000, Lyonnet – Faivre 2014, Kolinski 2014.

<sup>32</sup> For the intervention of the Hittite king Suppiluliuma in Syria and the complicated political situation before the Assyrian conquest of the area see Wilhelm 2015.

The silent eloquence of ceramics is made evident if we consider the nature of the depositional history of the Plaza, and contrast the early with the later periods. This open space remained practically unencumbered for over two thousand years, all the while the adjacent areas were being built up at a slow but steady pace. By the end, in the middle Mittani period, the Plaza had the appearance of a massive hole. Until then, it had been flanked only to the north by the 3 meter high revetment wall, while on the other three sides the levels were gradually rising until they reached about the same height as the revetment wall. By then, the site had become sparsely populated and life at the site had come to be concentrated primarily to the west of the Temple area; as a result, the Terrace had completely lost its appearance of a raised element in the skyline of the city: on all sides, except the sunken space of the Plaza, the occupational levels had risen to the same level as the Temple.

As the unoccupied and uncared for buildings to the east began to collapse, massive quantities of debris fell into this large hole, filling the empty eastern space of the plaza and obliterating the staircase (J2). This removed the functional value of the Plaza, which very rapidly filled everywhere to the same level as the rest of the city. This process consisted of a regular sequence of light accumulations (very clearly showing in J1). From these late Mittani accumulations came the large and very differentiated body of ceramics I have analyzed above. A rough estimate of the size of this fill would put it at between two and three thousand cubic meters of accumulated soil (!).

It was a tidy process, without any trash dumping or systemic discards. But far from being culturally sterile, these accumulations contained a good amount of ceramics, as one would find not in a systemic dump, but as the result of everyday usage. Clearly, even as the space was no longer functioning as a dedicated sacred space, it still called for respect. The analysis I have undertaken shows that there was high quality ceramics along with normal everyday crockery. They are only sherds, often very tiny in size. But this very fact allows us to draw a significant inference: they had dribbled down into the open space from the upper part of the city, as the result of activities still unfolding in the city and in the temple area. Thus we see in the ceramics in these humble accumulations deposited above the once great Plaza the silent yet eloquent witness of the last days of Urkesh.

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Fig. 1. Airview of temple terrace and plaza.



Fig. 2. Monumental staircase with eastern structures abandoned in the Mittani period.



Fig. 3. Mittani staircase.

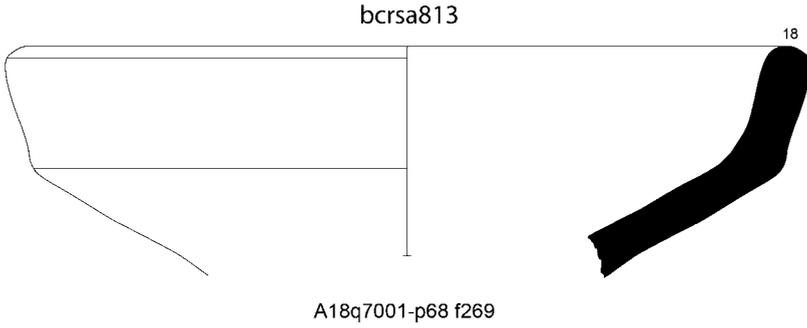


Fig. 4. Carinated bowl, A18q7001-p68.

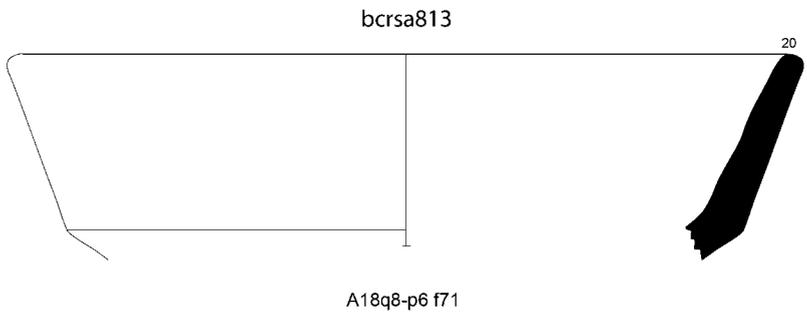


Fig. 5. Carinated bowl, A18q8-p6.

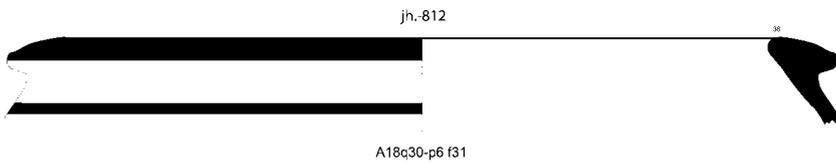


Fig. 6. Hole mouth jar, A18q30-p6.

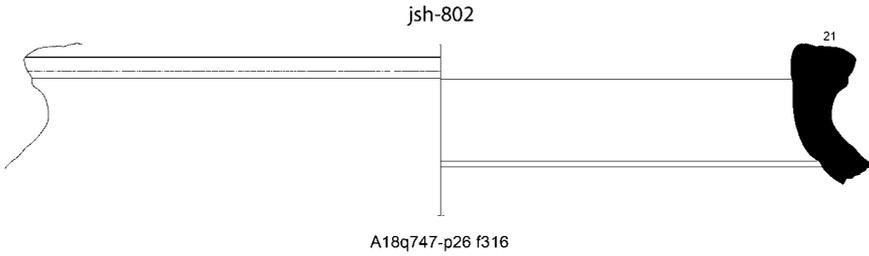


Fig. 7. Shouldered jar, A18q747-p26.

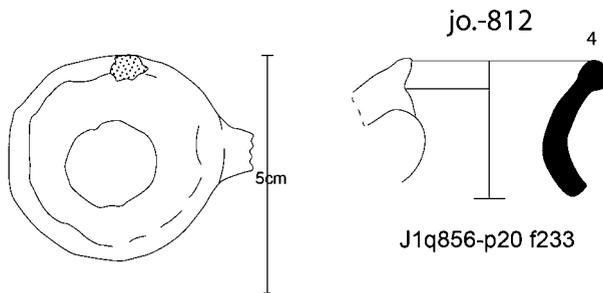


Fig. 8. Small jar with handle, J1q856-p20.

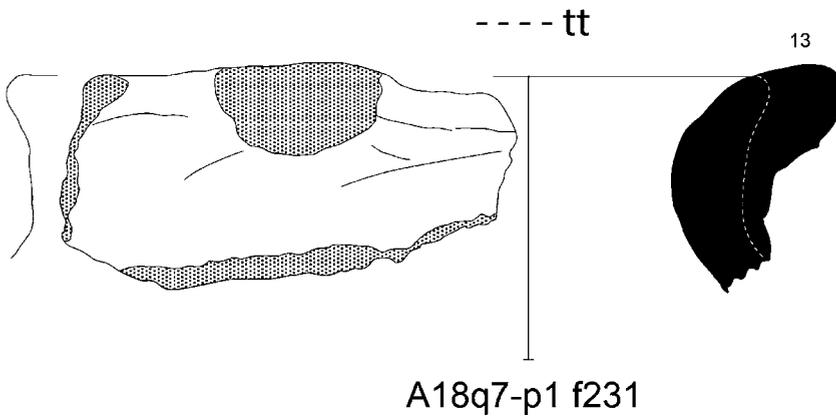
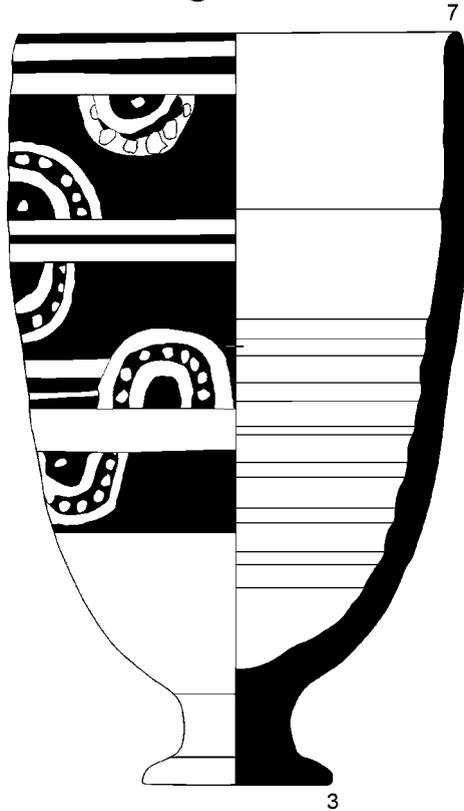


Fig. 9. Jar with tab handle, A18q7-p1.

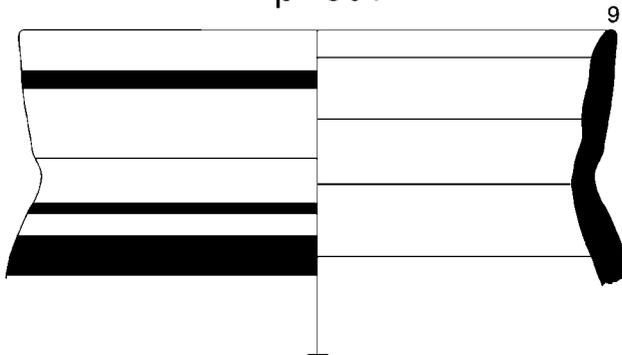
cgf-801



S1.15

Fig. 10. Footed goblet, S1.15.

p--801



A18q628-p7 f247

Fig. 11. Drinking pot, A18q628-p7.

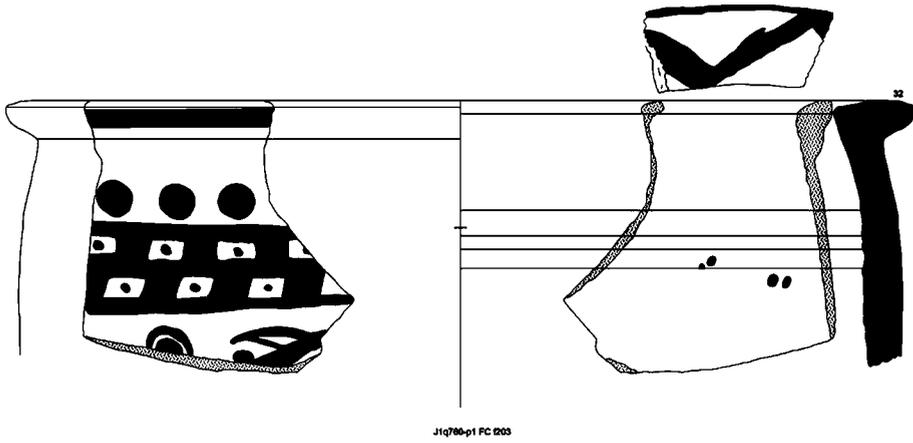


Fig. 12. Checkerboard and dots design, J1q0760-p01.

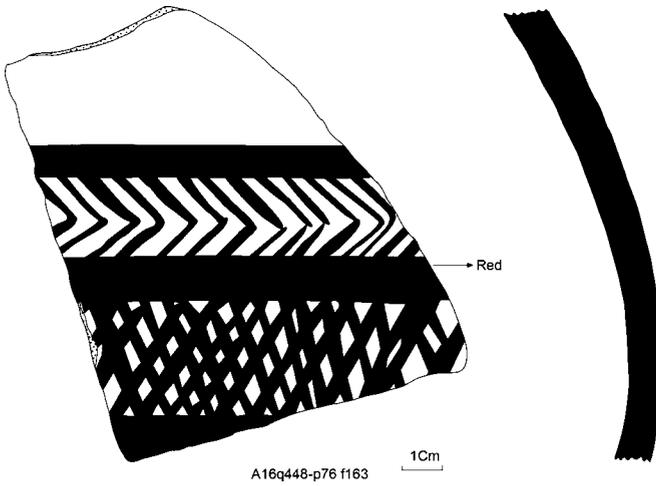


Fig. 13. Hatched band design, A16q0448-p76.

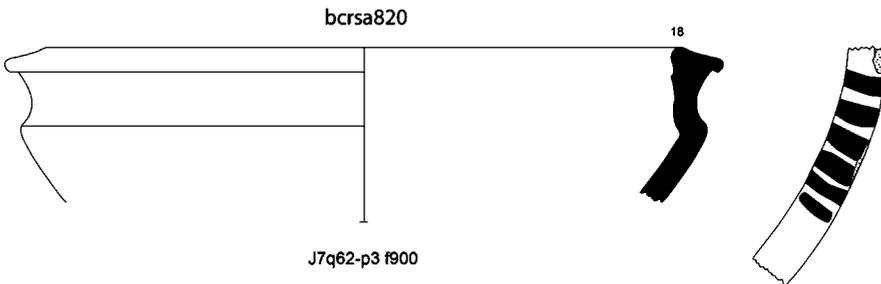


Fig. 14. Rim parallel strokes design, J7q0062-p03.

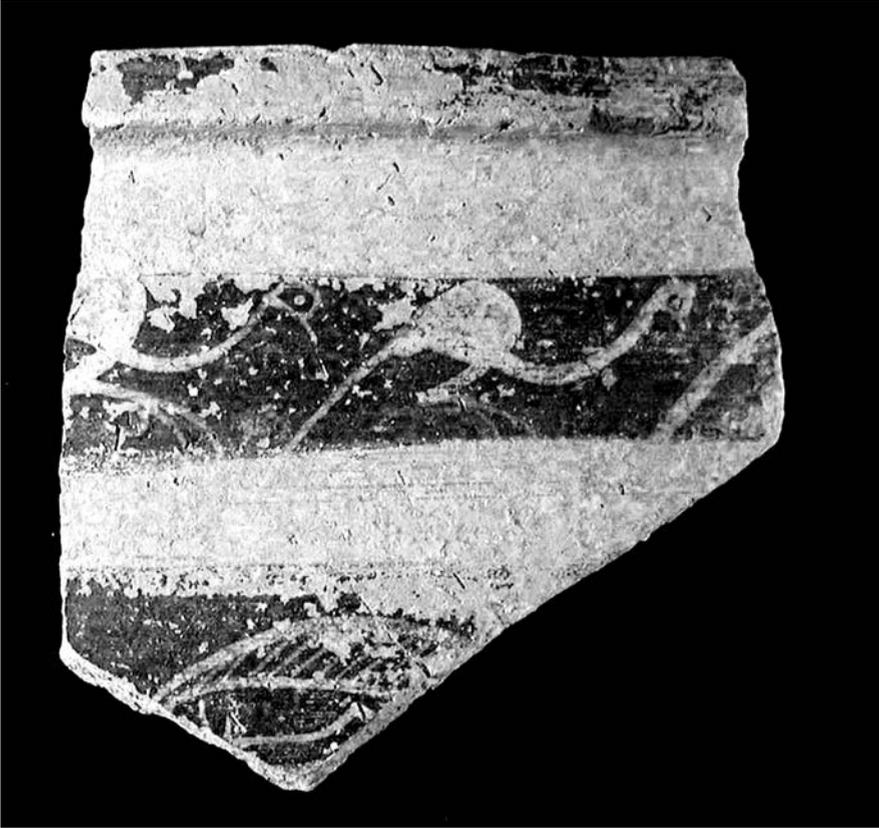


Fig. 15. Early Mittani bird design, J1q139-p1.

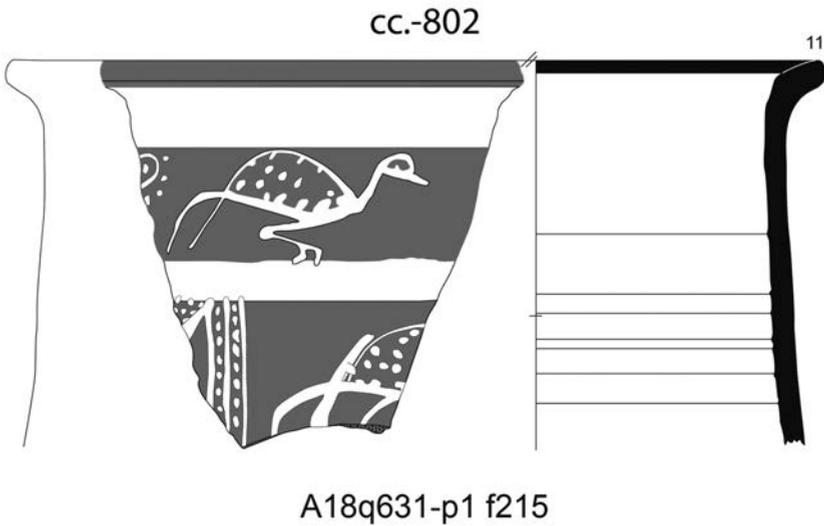
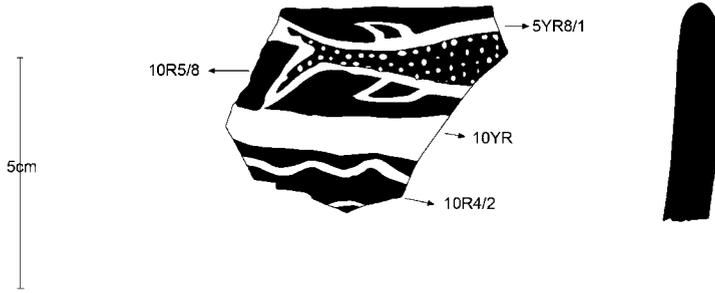
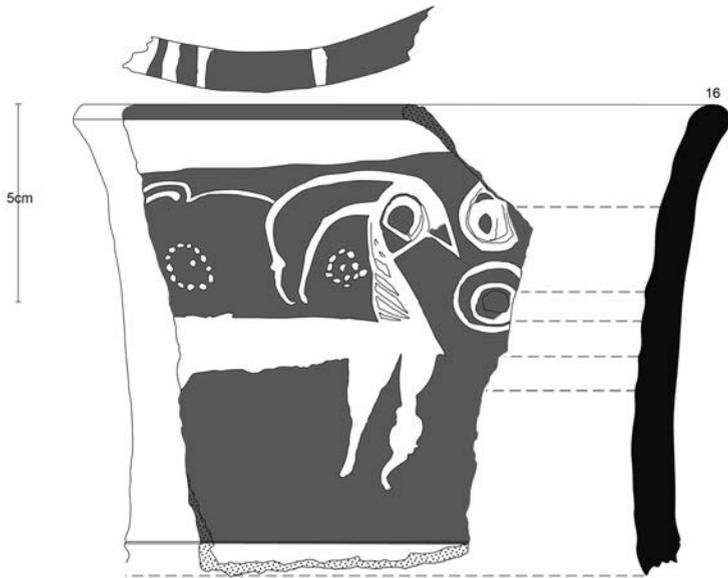


Fig. 16. White paint on red ground bird design, A18q631-p1.



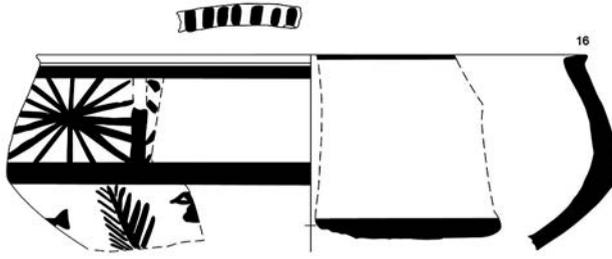
BHQ640-1 f614

Fig. 17. Fish pattern design, BHq640-01.



BHq540-p1

Fig. 18. Large horned animal design, BHq540-p1.



J1q1194.1 f237

Fig. 19. Double register design, J1q1194.01.

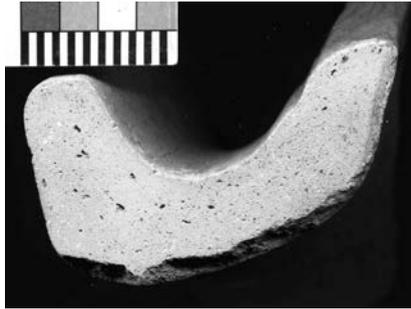


Fig. 20. Section of Mittani Chaff Tempered ware, A18q760-p11.

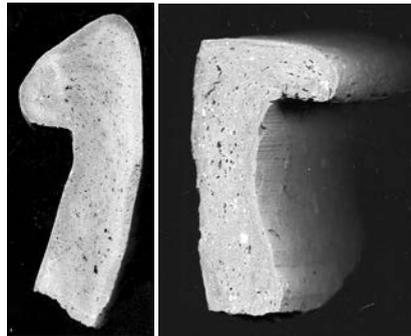


Fig. 21 (sin.). Lower fired Mittani Chaff Tempered ware, J02q0356-p04.

Fig. 22 (dx). Section of Mittani Red Calcite ware, A18q57p5.

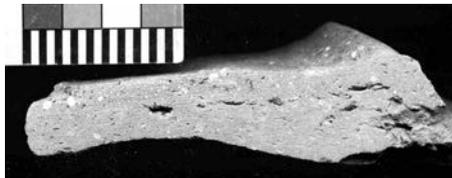


Fig. 23 Section of Mittani Red Calcite ware with large calcite inclusions, A18q599p1.



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