



Fingerprints, sex, state, and the organization of the Tell Leilan ceramic industry



Akiva Sanders*

University of Pennsylvania, USA

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ABSTRACT

The goal of this research is to elucidate the organization of ceramic production at Tell Leilan, Northeast Syria with respect to gender roles from 3400 to 1700 BCE through a study of fingerprint impressions on pottery. Using the distribution of epidermal ridge densities, a technique has been developed and tested to determine the proportion of men and women who formed and finished vessels in a ceramic assemblage. Analysis of 106 fingerprints preserved on sherds indicates that there is a discrete change in the sex ratio of potters at Leilan coincident with the rise of urbanism and state formation in northern Mesopotamia. No change in this pattern, however, are yet correlated with other political shifts, such as changes in the various regimes that had hegemony over the site during the Early and Middle Bronze Age. These results provide new information about the effect of state authority on the public and private organization of crafts as well as the division of society along gender lines. Surprisingly, this transformation in gender roles, which coincides with the rise of the state at Tell Leilan, is not visible at village sites in the Tell Leilan Regional Survey. This indicates that the changes in social fabric that occurred at urban sites with the establishment of state institutions did not occur to the same extent in smaller settlements even though the state did control some of the ceramic production at these sites, at least during the Akkadian period. This methodology and research has implications beyond northern Mesopotamia and provides an innovative technique to empirically test the highly theoretical literature on the relationship of gender to craft production in the archaeological record.

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1. Introduction

Tell Leilan, known as Šehna in the Early Bronze Age (ca. 3200–1900 BCE) and Šubat-Enlil during the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 1900–1500 BCE), was one of the major cities during this two-thousand-year span in the Khabur basin of northeastern Syria, in northern Mesopotamia (Fig. 1). This paper seeks to elucidate the organization of ceramic production at Tell Leilan, particularly with respect to political authority and gender roles from 3400 to 1700 BCE through a study of fingerprint impressions on pottery. As an innovative application of fingerprint analysis in Near Eastern archaeology, it may serve as a model for future studies of gender roles in the ancient world, and provide new information on the wider political and societal implications of these changes. This endeavor, therefore, stands in contrast to almost half a century of

archaeological discussion of gender roles in prehistory and early polities that rely heavily on essentialist theoretical suppositions and tangentially related ethnography.

1.1. Gender and pottery production across time in Mesopotamia

Previous studies addressing the role of gender in craft production have been highly abstract and theoretical and their methods have been based either on ethnographic parallels or on methods that are imprecise and widely criticized.

Until the last two decades, most prehistoric archaeologists maintained that with the advent of agriculture, urbanism, and finally state formation, women's roles in society became increasingly restricted (Campbell, 2008). This alleged change has been attributed to the development of craft specialization and the rise of private property (Leacock et al., 1978), a change from a kin-based social structure in which women had a comparatively equal status as “sisters” to a class-based social structure in which women held dependent status as “wives” (Sacks, 1979), and/or the transfer

* Present address: University of Chicago, USA.

E-mail address: sandersa@uchicago.edu.

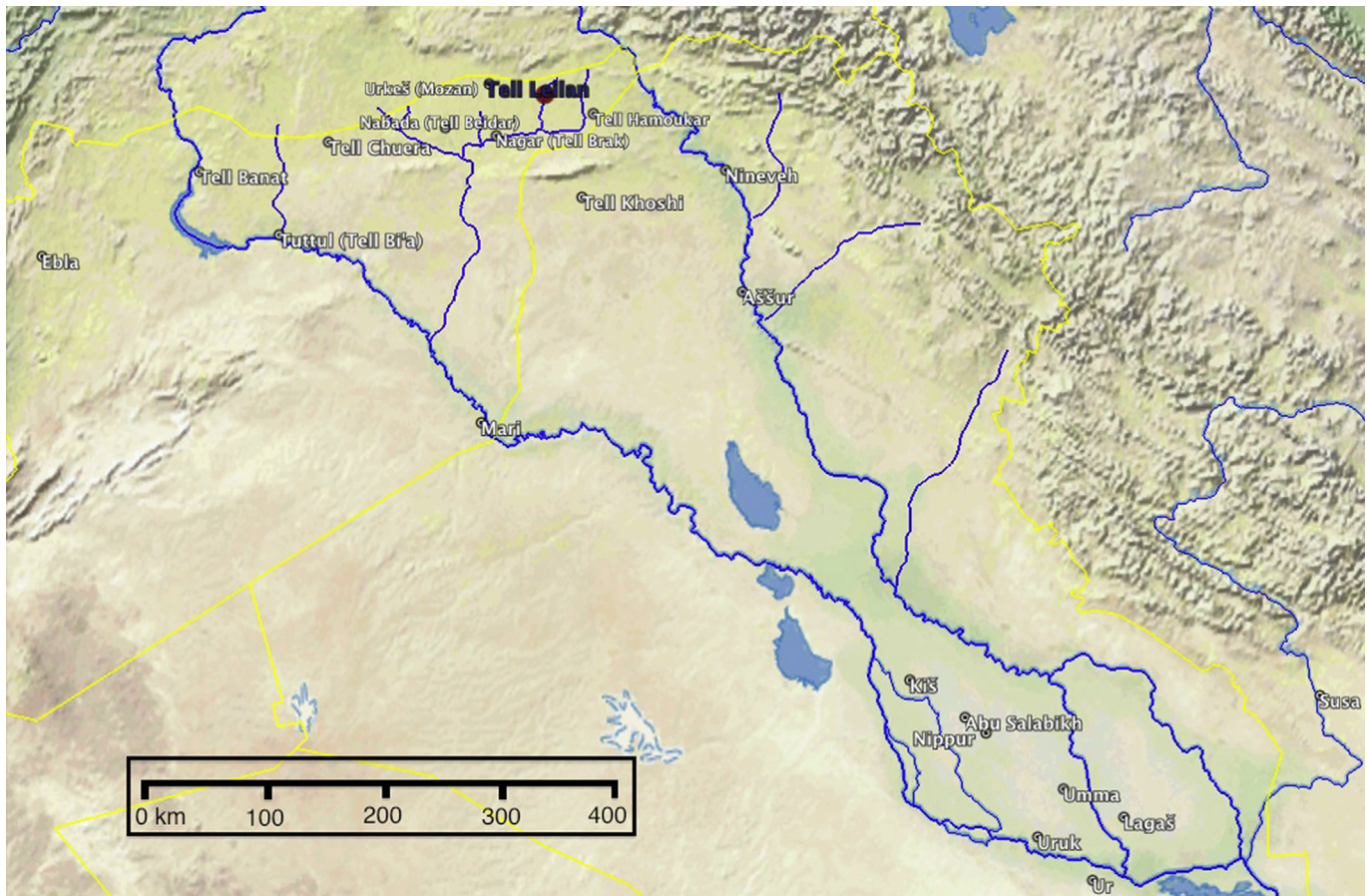


Fig. 1. Important sites of Early Bronze Age Mesopotamia.

of activities traditionally associated with the household to civic institutions, including cultic ritual and craft production (Wright, 2007). More generally, an increase in social complexity was associated with stricter and more hierarchical gender roles. In this context, Joy McCorriston studied the shift in textile production from flax-based to wool-based during the Mesopotamian Chalcolithic (1997). This change, she argues, prevented women who manufactured textiles from accessing materials needed to produce goods and thus alienated their labor from its products, preventing them from attaining higher economic status.¹

Textual evidence for pottery production in Mesopotamia supports these suppositions. All of the names in lists of potters from the Akkadian, Ur III, and Old Babylonian states in the late third and early second millennia are invariably male gendered (Senior and Weiss, 1992: 19). These lists refer only to institutionally attached potters, leaving the question of the gender of potters producing ceramics for domestic use unanswered. Steinkeller suggests that the “only feasible explanation” of how private individuals acquired craft products in southern Mesopotamia is that the same workshops produced pottery for state and private consumption (Steinkeller, 1996: 253). This suggestion is commensurate with the hypothesis that the role of women became more constrained with

the rise of state-organized craft production, establishing them as the sole producers of textiles, but not of pottery.

However, others have argued that both men and women may have produced pottery, with gendered participation depending on the scale and degree of specialization necessary. Some ethnographic data suggest that wheel-made pottery is produced exclusively by males in preindustrial societies (Kramer, 1985: 79, Senior, 1998: 184) and/or that household-based domestic pottery production is dominated by females in societies where pottery production is not the major source of subsistence for the households of those engaged in the craft (Byrne, 1994: 238). As a result, many archaeologists of ancient Near Eastern complex societies hypothesize that wheel-made pottery was made by male specialists on a large scale, while handmade pottery was made in small-scale domestic contexts in villages by women (Potts, 1997:161, Renger, 1984: 66). Ethnographic observations have confirmed that both men and women act as potters in the Near East (Kramer, 1985: 83, Matson, 1974: 345). However, the line between “wheel-made” and “hand-made” pottery cannot be drawn with any level of precision. Pottery was frequently made using a variety of hand and wheel techniques, particularly during the second and third millennia BCE (Courty and Roux, 1995; Roux and Courty, 1998).

1.2. Questioning assumptions of Women's roles and the definition of potters

Recently, Diane Bolger and Rita Wright have argued that the role of women was in flux throughout prehistoric and historical periods

¹ This study, however, has faced criticism due to our inability to precisely track the use of various fibers in textiles over prehistoric periods, as well as the roles of women in the various tasks associated with craft production during this period (Zettler in McCorriston, 1997).

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