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Research Article

The River Divides? Imagined Borders and Practised Borderities in the Lower Sirwan River Valley

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Abstract

This paper explores two sites recently excavated by the Sirwan Regional Project (SRP)—Tepe Kalan (SRP018) and Kani Masi (SRP094)—located just 14 km apart on opposite sides of the lower Sirwan river in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq and occupied simultaneously during the Middle Bronze Age I (*c.* 2000–1850 BCE). The MB I was a lively period of political negotiation and cultural reconfiguration across the region, with these dynamics playing out in various social arenas, from rock reliefs to everyday eating and drinking activities. Detailed examination of the functional potentialities of pottery vessels from the two sites, set within an inter-regional context of connectivity, demonstrates alternative community networks and practices of cultural production. These material insights challenge us to reconceptualize our traditional approaches to borders and their state-driven political and cultural materializations and narratives. We emphasize here the perspective of mobile borders and emergent borderities, which allow us to move towards careful articulations of localized processes, community encounters and temporalities beyond the state.

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Introduction

How borders are conceived, brought into being, maintained and regulated has long been a focus of cross-disciplinary research, much of which has struggled to break away from a Westphalian model that seeks direct links between territory, as bounded, cartographical space, and the state, as the dominant power bestowed with sovereignty over that territory (for critique, see Amilhat Szary & Giraut 2015, 7; Fourny 2013; Konrad & Amilhat Szary 2023; Paasi 1998; Popescu 2011). Anachronistic 'lines on a map' approaches to defining state territories with fixed borders have framed archaeological and Assyriological practice since their disciplinary inception, influenced no doubt by monumental historical constructions such as the Roman *limes*, the Great Wall of China (e.g. Glatz 2020, 119–23 for a recent discussion and critique), or, more geographically and chronologically relevant here, the so-called 'Amorite Wall' ('MAR.TU-Mauer', after Wilcke 1969, 1), a network of fortifications ostensibly built by kings Shulgi (2094–2046 BCE) and Shu-Sin (2037–2028 BCE) to keep the Amorites out of Sumerian lands (see Michalowski 2011, 122–9 for discussion).

Historical geographies regularly fix ancient borders to permanent and semi-permanent physical landscape features. The sprawling mosaic of mountain ranges, passes, intermontane plains and river valleys that make up the Zagros piedmont zone have regularly been tied to the imperial and localized borders of ancient political entities: Ur III, Ešnunna, Simurrum, Lullubum and Gutium (Altaweel *et al.* 2016 2012; Charpin 2021; Eidem 1985, 98; Eidem & Laessøe 2001, nos 1 and 2; Frayne 1997; 2011; Ziegler 2011). Underpinning these discourses, however, is a one-directional story of division, whereby lowland Mesopotamian elites spun narratives of transitional and highland communities as uncivilized, unruly and, ultimately, subordinate (Glatz & Casana 2016). The Sirwan/Diyala[1] (henceforth Sirwan) river valley figures prominently in this imagined geography, with the region shifting in and out of historical focus based on the rhetoric of domination and resource extraction projected by successive lowland kings, and ostensibly mimicked by local rulers through a series of rock reliefs in the Zagros front ranges dating to the late third and early second millennia BCE.

This article focuses on the perceptions and practices that configured Middle Bronze Age borders. While bordering is the process of creating or reinforcing boundaries, be they physical, social, or political, debordering processes aim to reduce those boundaries, leading to permeability, unity and increased cross-border interaction (Amilhat Szary & Fourny 2006; Jones 2009). Scholarly research on ancient borders has increasingly been drawn into tense contemporary political debates, which seek to normalize modern boundaries or

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advance polarizing (de)bordering processes, and significant criticism has recently been levelled at archaeological approaches to borders for repeating, and inadvertently bringing into being, the top-down 'state idea' (Abrams 1988, 82; also Campbell 2021, 38; Paasi 1998).

Normative approaches to state territorialities infuse our understandings of and approaches to diverse archaeological materialities. 'Plain' pottery assemblages,[2] for instance, have assumed a prominent role in the archaeological imagination as a proxy for identifying the spatial-temporal reach of the early state and its assumed proto-capitalist economy (see Glatz 2020 for an Anatolian example; Green *et al.* 2023 for a general critique). During the later second millennium BCE, it is the plain Middle Babylonian ceramic assemblages, also referred to as 'Kassite', whose distribution continues to be seen by many to be co-terminous with Kassite political control. Referring to changes observed in the ceramic assemblages of Tell Yelkhi in the Hamrin basin between the fifteenth and thirteenth centuries BCE, Armstrong recently suggested that 'although we know virtually nothing about the political, social and economic connections between Arrapha and the Hamrin it is probably not coincidental that sometime after Arrapha fell to the Assyrians in the mid-14th century the Babylonians expanded into the upper Diyala Basin and brought the Hamrin under Kassite political control. When they came in, their potters came with them.' (Armstrong 2017, 432; see also Armstrong & Gasche 2014, 102).

Both Tell Yelkhi's ceramic connections to northern Mesopotamia, such as Tell Nuzi (Arrapha), and the subsequent changes in local pottery traditions, which point to connections to Babylonia (the Kassite heartland), are thought to have political origins. The presence of some Babylonian shapes at the Iranian site of Tepe Guran, too, are thought to evidence the presence of Babylonians at the site during the Kassite period (Armstrong 2017, 433; Pons & Gasche 2006, 380). The geographical expansion of Middle Babylonian pottery suggests that 'the Babylonians seem to have been pushing outward along the major trade routes . . . in order to get closer to the sources of raw materials and other trade goods' (Armstrong 2017, 434; Pons and Gasche 2006, 380). Fuchs (2017, 146) similarly points to the distribution of Kassite pottery to support the hypothesis—based on Neo-Assyrian texts, which date several centuries later—of Kassite political control over parts of western Iran. Ultimately, Armstrong and Gasche (2014, 102), in their cornerstone study of second-millennium BCE Mesopotamian pottery, conclude that 'in the geographic distribution of Babylonian pottery, both in the heartland and along the periphery, we can begin to see reflections of the expansion and contraction of Babylonian political and economic power'.

Ceramic standardization and inter/intra-site *similarity* is equated with tight state control over a given territory, while stylistic *differences* are framed either spatially, as the product of rigid border divides, or temporally, as a signifier of large–scale shifts in centralized power. This is despite the fact that past territorialities have long been recognised as more web- or network-like than the more contiguous powers of (some) modern states (see Glatz 2020 for an extended discussion).

These explanatory frameworks sit at the heart of the survey methodologies dominant in the archaeology of Southwest Asia, which are based almost entirely in pottery seriation (Adams 1965; Wilkinson 2003), with the identification of 'type-fossils' (after Jacobsen & Adams 1958, 1254) that become go-to proxies for political territoriality and temporality. Such essentializing political–typological approaches see pottery styles marching in lockstep with historically defined Mesopotamian states. Materialities on the borders are assumed to match those of the 'core' territory, while localized nuance is commonly overlooked as incidental noise (after Langer & Fernández-Götz 2020, 38). Temporality, too, remains a coarse construct, which, given the relative lack of radiocarbon dates generated from excavations in the region, also remains locked to these pottery type-fossils.

The contemporary relevance of border discussions places significant onus on archaeologists to develop socially relevant, empirically grounded and theoretically informed discourses about past socio-spatialities. To address this, Hanscam and Buchanan (2023) emphasize the importance of recent developments in critical border studies, which foreground the psychological dimensions of borders, conceptualizing them fundamentally as apparatus for regulating flows between internal and external, inclusion and exclusion (Foucault 2007). Emerging from postcolonial discourses is a view of borders as devices that distinguish communities based on values, customs and traditions (see Bravo 2022 for discussion), all of which are experienced and negotiated in moments of socio-spatial *encounter*. Common within this research are varied concepts of hybridity, in-betweenness, liminality (e.g. Fourny 2013; Krichker 2021; Parker & Vaughan-Williams 2016), and the increasing prominence of 'Third Space' studies (after Bhabha 1996; 2004; Hamdy 2010; Naum 2010).

Amilhat Szary and Giraut (2015) conceptualize modern borders as 'mobile', in that they are disseminated in a relational manner rather than physically fixed and territorialized. To capture this fluidity, they develop a flexible concept of 'borderities', defined as 'the multiple rules and experiences of what a border can be . . . not divided by lines whose visibility gives a sense of political balances, but structured by limits that are constantly being redefined' (Amilhat Szary & Giraut 2015, 3). Borderities, like 'Third Space', are multi-located and relational; they are 'engaged, altered, produced, materialised, and removed in this dynamic border interaction of human society, politics and space' (Konrad & Amilhat Szary 2023, 22). Langer and Fernández-Götz (2020, 41) therefore suggest a combined approach to the study of pre-modern borders, which emphasizes, on the one hand, the perspective of political thought drawn from texts and monumental constructions, and on the other, close material culture analysis that researches lived experiences—reinforcing the need for what Naum (2010, 105) has referred to as a 'materiality-conscious archaeology'. Within and between these sources of evidence is where we might identify borderities, mediated through the carefully curated as well as non-discursive material practices that structured past socio-spatialities.

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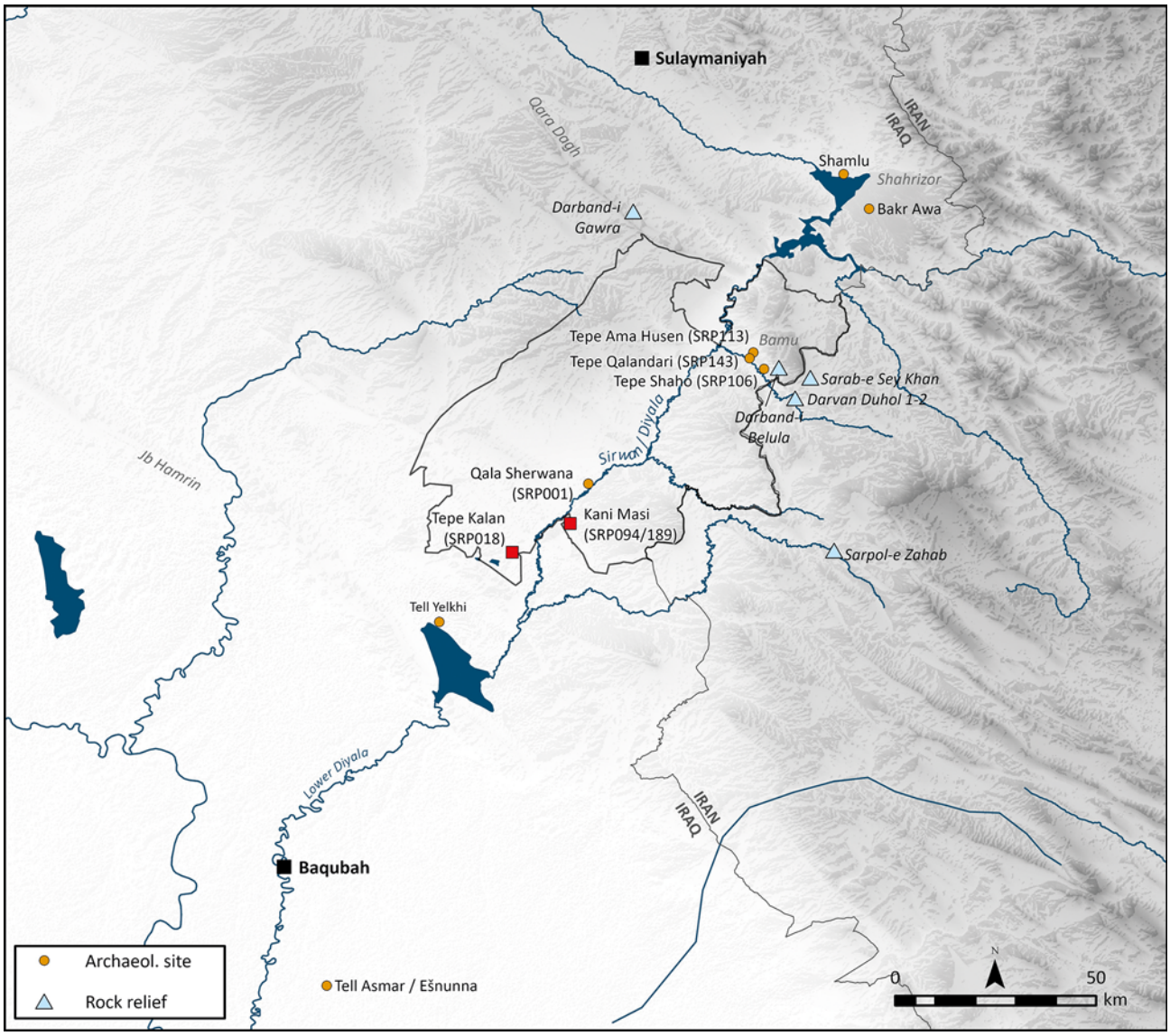


Figure 1. Map of the Sirwan river valley, showing the SRP survey region and the main archaeological sites and locational features mentioned in the text. (Map: Francesca Chelazzi.)

In this paper, we examine newly excavated Middle Bronze Age I (*c.* 2000–1800 BCE) plain-ware pottery assemblages from two sites—Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi—located just 14 km apart on either side of the Sirwan river and separated by low-lying hill ranges. We begin with a critical discussion of the landscapes of the Sirwan river valley, their topographic boundaries and conduits, and how these may have influenced multi-directional power flows, in historical and archaeological perspective. We then introduce the two case study sites and their respective assemblages, analysed alongside contemporary evidence collected from the Sirwan survey region and set within their wider (inter-)regional context, addressing aspects of vessel style, production and commensal performance.

The Sirwan river valley

The Sirwan river valley is a highland–lowland transitional zone traversed by its eponymous river, which winds northeast–southwest, from the Zagros mountains to its confluence with the Tigris close to modern Baghdad (Fig. 1). On its journey, the Sirwan passes through a complex patchwork of mountain chains, intermontane plains, river valleys and passes, which variously act as inhibitors or enablers to settlement and movement. The most northerly of these zones consists of the hilly flanks and high fertile plateaus of the Zagros front ranges, such as the Shahrizor plain, a region enveloped to the south by the imposing edifice of the Qara Dagh mountain range. Several narrow passes descend through the Qara Dagh to reach rugged upland

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terraces, which are characterized by limited flat land suited to agricultural production, but hold abundant springs and tributary river valleys connecting to the Zagros.

Just north of the modern city of Kalar, the landscape opens onto a series of elongated alluvial basins, including the Bnkura and Qubba plains—the location of Kani Masi (SRP094) and Tepe Kalan (SRP018)—while further south is the Hamrin Basin. These relatively fertile plains are separated from one another by parallel northwest–southeast anticlinal ridges, the most prominent of which is the Jebel Hamrin, largely impassable other than at the bottleneck where the river punches through and its alluvial deposits merge with those of the Tigris, endowing the surrounding landscape with a flat steppe topography very similar to much of lower Mesopotamia (Adams 1965, 4–5).

The Sirwan region has long held strategic value. While the river valley itself channels north–south movement between the Shahrizor high plateau and the lowland plains of southern Mesopotamia, the plains of the lower Sirwan were in various periods traversed by important east–west overland routes such as, in the Bronze Age, the so-called Elam–Kišma–Dēr–Diyala Road (Carter & Stolper 1984, 58–60). More northerly routes, via for example the Hawasan, Zahab, Qoratu and Alwand valleys, also connect the region with a broader inter-regional network, bringing local communities into regular contact with those of Babylonia, the Zagros highlands, Luristan, Elam and beyond.

According to diverse textual sources, including letters, royal correspondences, administrative documents and merchant texts, the MB I period (*c.* 2000–1800 BCE) saw an acceleration of inter-regional cultural contact in this area, much of which centres on the city of Ešnunna (Tell Asmar) (De Graef 2022). Starting early in Ibbi-Sin's reign (*c.* 2028–2004 BCE), Ešnunna claimed independence from the Third Dynasty of Ur. Other cities in the Diyala and Hamrin soon followed suit, resulting in a constellation of independent city-states and rulers (Charpin 2004, 388–90; 2021, 11). Direct textual inscriptions bear the names of several local governors in the lower Sirwan, at Tutub (Khafajah), Nerēbtum (Ishchali), Šadduppŭm (Harmal) and Zaralulu (Dhiba'i), while local rulers' names can also be associated with specific city-states, namely Arim Lim of Me Turan, which corresponds to the modern agglomeration of Tell Haddad/Tell es Sib, and Aiiabum of Batir, the ancient name for Tell Suleimah[3] (Frayne 1990, 688, 694–702; Greengus 1986, 185; Rashid 1984, 56; Saporetti 2002, 167–82). The discovery of an archive of tablets at Tell Yelkhi (Level V), dated relatively through pottery styles to the early centuries of the second millennium BCE, also includes the appellation of local 'governor', therefore pointing towards its own economic and political independence (Bergamini *et al.* 1985, 57–8; Saporetti 2002, 150–52).

This pattern of distributed influence broadly aligns with the fragmentation of authority in southern Mesopotamia, where the cities of Isin and Larsa took turns claiming power and territory (Oates 1979, 49–59). However, when Ipiq-Adad II (*c.* 1862–1818 BCE) ascended the throne of Ešnunna, the city's power rapidly expanded, ostensibly to cover swathes of the lower Sirwan region (Charpin 2021, 10–11) and well beyond into western Iran (Gentili 2021). Soon after (*c.* 1762 BCE), Ešnunna, and perhaps larger areas northwards along the Sirwan, appear to have been progressively occupied by Ḫammurabi in an offensive that marked the end of Ešnunnan independence (Richardson 2005).

MB I rock reliefs located in the Zagros foothills speak to a complicated set of relationships and rivalries, internally between local and highland Zagros elites—Simurrum and Lullubum in particular—as well as externally with lowland Mesopotamia. Especially important here are debates surrounding the emergence of Simurrum in the late third and early second millennia BCE, which scholarly consensus locates somewhere along the upper Sirwan, centred perhaps around the Shahrizor plain (Altaweel *et al.* 2012; Frayne 2011) or the Bnkura plain where the prominent Qala Sherwana (SRP001) is located (Ahmed 2012, 297–302; Frayne 1997).

The inscription of Iddi(n)-Sîn, king of Simurrum, found at Bitwata near Ranya, for instance, portrays his northern campaigns between *c.* 2000 and 1900 BCE. The king is depicted bare-chested, holding a bow in the left hand and a scimitar in the right, and trampling a fallen enemy in front of a goddess (Shaffer *et al.* 2003, 3). Altaweel *et al.* (2012, 11) believe this scene was deliberately emulated in rock reliefs at Darband-i Gawr (Strommenger 1963), in the Qara Dagh to the south, as well as at a series of reliefs at Sarpol-e Zahab in western Iran, including the Anubanini relief (Frayne 1990, 4.18.1, fig.4; Niknami & Mirghaderi 2019). These reliefs share distinct iconographic similarities with traditional Mesopotamian artistic compositions, especially the victory stele of Naram-Sin of Akkad and the stele of Dāduša (Suter 2018), with the use of Akkadian cuneiform in some examples representing localized interpretations of characteristic Mesopotamian aesthetics (Glatz 2014, 128). A roughly worked relief, the Darband-i Belula (also known as Shaikhan), similarly depicting an unknown local ruler vanquishing an unknown local enemy, has been identified on a relatively inaccessible rocky platform close to the Bamu range (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 174, fig. 5.19; Postgate & Roaf 1997). The Darband-i Belula relief forms the westernmost of a recently identified group—Darvan Duhol 1–2 and Sarab-e Sey Khan stele—discovered further east along the Hawasan valley (Alibaigi & MacGinnis 2023; Alibaigi *et al.* 2020; Biglari *et al.* 2018).

Alibaigi and MacGinnis (2023) suggest that Iddi(n)-Sîn of Simurrum launched a military campaign against several mounded sites lying on the western slopes of the Bamu range—Tepe Shaho (SRP106), Tepe Ama Husen (SRP113) and Tepe Qalandari (SRP143)—and that it is the ostensible victories over these communities that are commemorated in the rock reliefs situated along these strategic routes. These reliefs, they believe, mark the limits of Iddi(n)-Sîn's military expeditions into the Zagros and delimit the borders of Simurrum, which Alibaigi *et al.* (2020, 21) describe as 'one of the oldest surviving political boundaries in the world'. This firm border is argued to exist despite fleeting recognition that the distribution of everyday material culture—predominantly Mesopotamian-style ceramics—clearly traversed it (Alibaigi *et al.* 2020, 37).

The historical reconstruction, supported by monumental rock reliefs, conveys an impressionistic account of high-level diplomatic and military activities that impacted the region

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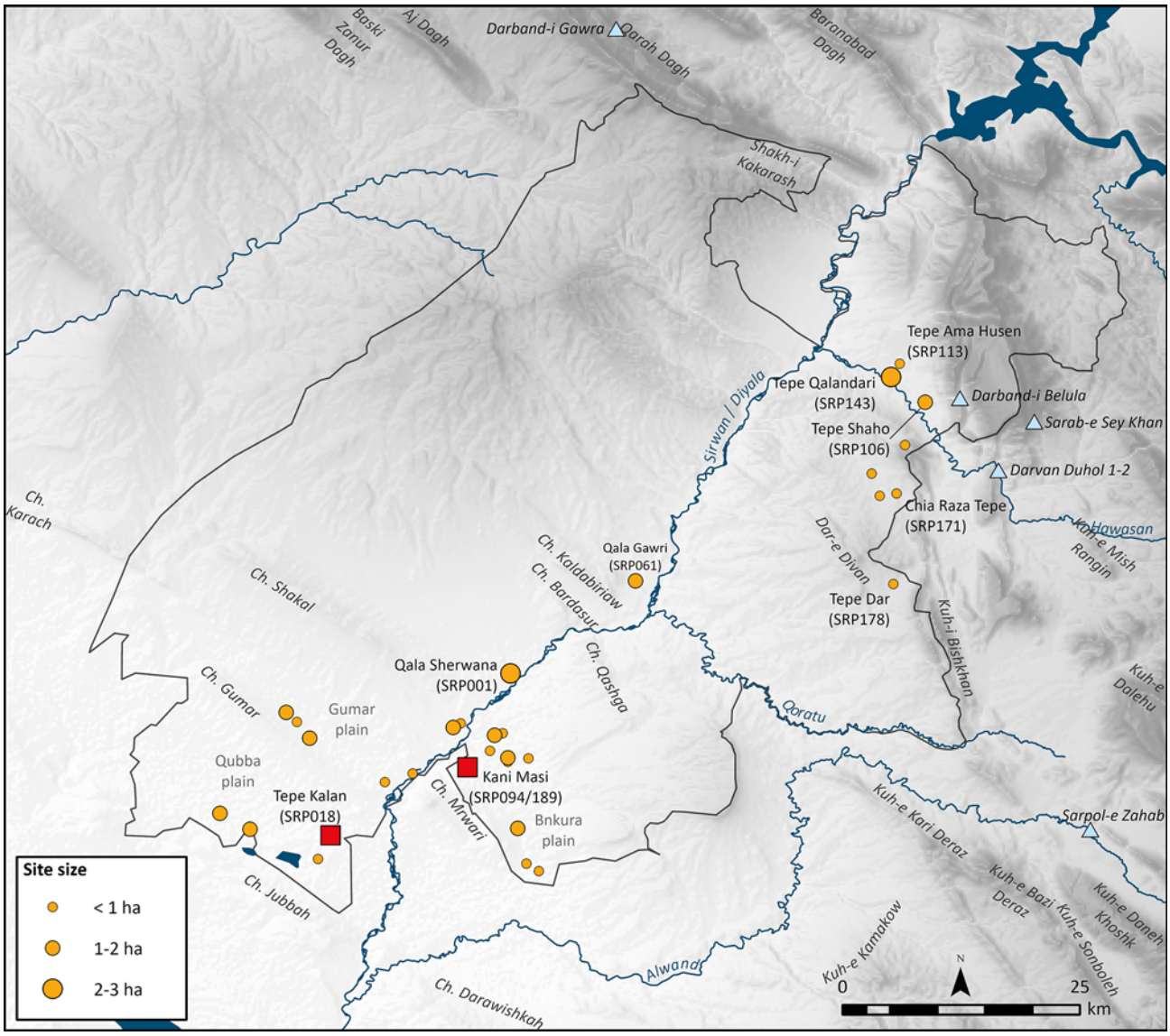


Figure 2. Map of the Sirwan Regional Project survey area, showing the location of Tepe Kalan, Kani Masi, other MB sites, and rock reliefs. (Map: Francesca Chelazzi.)

during the MB I, projected by lowland and local elites aspiring to make manifest their various ideological claims to power and territory (after Richardson 2012). Analysis of these reliefs have acted in service of normative interpretations of spatial politics, when we might more fruitfully analyse these same monuments as a series of set-pieces, carefully curated borderities, which project rather than commemorate sovereignty over unruly and contested landscapes (Glatz 2014; 2020), and which can only be understood in relation to contemporary bottom-up processes expressed through everyday material encounters.

The Sirwan Regional Project: survey and excavation

The SRP's regional survey, which covers an area of *c.* 4000 sq. km along the course of the middle and lower Sirwan and its tributaries, has since 2013 identified 31 sites dating to the MB period (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 151–80) (Fig. 2). Most of these sites are newly settled, appearing to accord with increased precipitation in the region, as demonstrated by the Kuna Ba speleothem sequence (Sinha *et al.* 2019).

A differential settlement pattern has been observed at the line of the Gumar/Shakal and Mrwari hill-ranges, a geological bottleneck, where the Sirwan river forces its way through one of the westernmost low-lying ranges of the Zagros foothills. To the south of the Gumar/Shakal–Mrwari line, in the Qubba Plain, is a handful of larger sites, including Tepe Kalan (SRP018), which compare in size and spatial hierarchy with those in the Hamrin basin to the south. Tepe Kalan is one of the largest (*c.* 21 ha total), made up of a prominent 4.5 ha main mound, rising 25 m above the surrounding plain, and a sprawling lower mound to its north. Excavations in two areas of the lower mound revealed two main phases of occupation (Phases 1–2), consisting of a complex of domestic architecture and small-scale storage (Fig. 3a), as well as an outdoor multi-functional space bisected by a curved

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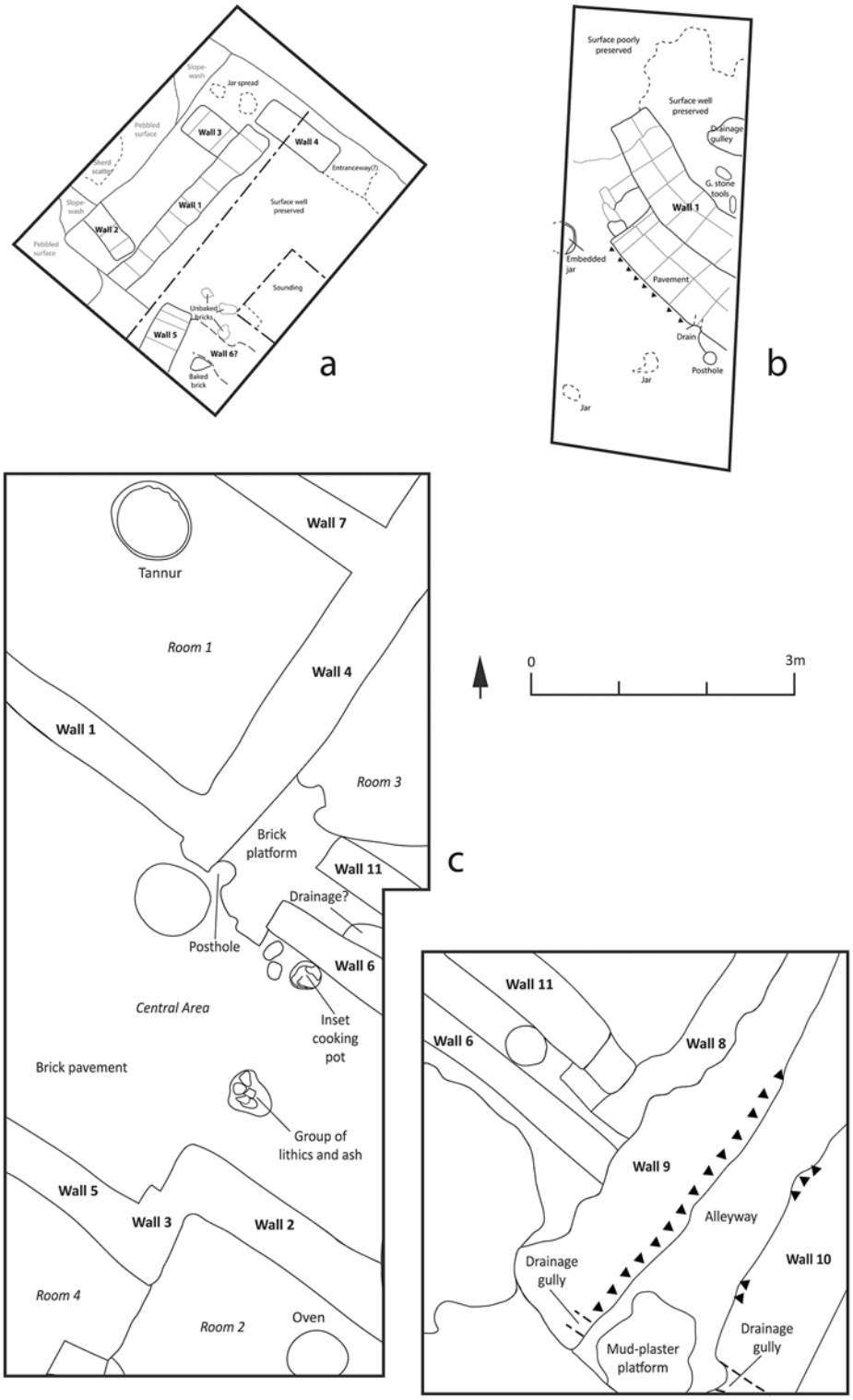


Figure 3. Annotated plans of excavation areas at Tepe Kalan: (a) Trench A; (b) Trench B; and Kani Masi: (c) Trench K136.

retaining wall (Calderbank *et al.* in review) (Fig. 3b). The 200 m separating these two excavated exposures, as well as the extensive surface spread of MB I vessel types from surface survey, speak to the significant size of Tepe Kalan during this period. Therefore, while both excavated areas represent everyday non-elite activity, it is not impossible that elite residences and institutions may also be present somewhere at the site.

By contrast, the settlement pattern directly north of the Gumar/Shakal-Mrwari ranges, in the Bnkura plain, lacks clear site-size distinctions, with a scatter of small-scale agricultural settlements ranging up to 2 ha in size. One of

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Table 1. Phasing and associated calibrated mass spectrometry radiocarbon dates of charcoal and pulse samples from Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi.

Phase	Context	Lab No.	Material	Uncal. (BP)	1 Sigma (BCE) (IntCal2020)	2 Sigma (BCE) (IntCal2020)
Tepe Kalan (SRP018)						
1	B/L7/L1	AA115228/X36823	Charcoal	3597±40	2019–1896	2127–1779
1	A/L9/L2	AA115226/X36821	Charcoal	3588±34	2011–1894	2034–1780
2	B/L6/L2	AA115227/X36822	Charcoal	3542±34	1937–1779	2011–1751
2	A/L8/L4	AA115225/X36820	Charcoal	3538±40	1938–1775	2011–1748
Kani Masi (SRP094)*						
1	K136/L115/L3	AA113264/X34920R	Charcoal	3625±27	2027–1948	2122–1897
1–2	K136/L111/L1	AA113266/X34922	Charcoal	3533±25	1921–1778	1946–1768
2–3a	K136/L117/L1	AA114864/X36469	Charcoal	3568±28	1956–1882	2021–1778
3a	K136/L108/L2	AA114863/X36468	Lentil	3577±28	2008–1886	2025–1781

*SRP094 dates previously published in Glatz *et al.* (2024, 153).

these is Kani Masi (SRP094), part of the Kani Masi site cluster that includes the Late Bronze Age mound of the same name (SRP046).[4] Excavations at SRP094 revealed three phases (Phases 1–3) of domestic occupation, composed of several small architectural units surrounding a central space, which together produced assemblages associated closely with relatively low-status food production and consumption; an alleyway to the east was also used for material and organic discard (Glatz *et al.* 2019, 464–7; 2024, 156–61) (Fig. 3c). An associated burial ground (SRP189), where two adult inhumations have been exposed, was also partially excavated on a low mound directly to the west (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 161–4).

Beyond the Qubba and Bnkura plains, most sites located in the more northerly upland zones of the Sirwan, closest to the major rock reliefs of the Zagros front ranges, discussed earlier, are very small in size. Even the tallest mounds, such as Tepe Shaho (SRP106), cover only approximately 1 ha in size and there are no discernible signs of hierarchical spatial organization in the settlement record to date (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 175–9). This suggests a very different socio-political organization to the sites of southern Mesopotamia, and encourages us to question the trust conventionally placed in lowland royal and administrative titles (for a summary of these, see e.g. Altaweel *et al.* 2012, 9–11) to capture accurately the political landscapes of the uplands (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 42, 177).

Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi: the assemblages

It is clear from nine radiocarbon dates—five from Kani Masi (SRP094) and four from Tepe Kalan (SRP018)—that these sites were almost certainly occupied simultaneously during the MB I, beginning sometime in the early twentieth century and continuing through to the early nineteenth century BCE (Table 1; Fig. 4). Historically, this aligns with the period of localized governance and inter-city competition known further south in the Hamrin, Diyala and southern Mesopotamia, as well as with the more northerly manoeuvring of Iddi(n)-Sîn of Simurrum. Both Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi also appear to have been abandoned at approximately the same time, during the mid-nineteenth to early eighteenth century, the period during which Ešnunna's military campaigns under Ipiq-Adad II and his successors (*c.* 1862–1780 BCE) gathered pace, but before Ḫammurabi turned his attention to the Sirwan region (*c.* 1762 BCE).

Underpinning these temporal and historical alignments at both sites are fundamental differences in their everyday material assemblages. While both sites demonstrate restricted and largely plain pottery assemblages, their styles, functionality and regional connections differ significantly. Kani Masi's tableware assemblage consists of bowls and beakers, whose characteristics match well with types known from Late EB and MB I stratified assemblages across the wider region. Kani Masi's bowls are varied in shape. Most common are hemispherical bowls with grooved upper bodies and simple rounded rims (Fig. 5a–c; Table 2), as well as medium-sized open bowls with ledge-rims or outwardly bevelled rims (Fig. 5d–f). Vessel sides vary, with curved, sinuous and sharply carinated examples all demonstrated. These vessels are made of various sizes, with hemispherical bowls yielding rim diameters of between 150 and 250 mm and ledge-rim/outwardly bevelled bowls slightly wider, between 180 and 280 mm. This hints at a potential functional difference between individual and communal eating, with the larger ledge-rim/outwardly bevelled bowl's rim shapes designed for portability.

All bowls from Kani Masi have light pink-cream surface colours with finely cut chaff inclusions, are evenly fired and are produced by wheel-coiling, with some evidence for smoothing and finishing. Stylistically, Kani Masi's bowls have fairly restricted parallels at Tell Yelkhi Levels 6–5 (Gabutti 2002–03, tav. 30.3–4, 34–8), Tell ed-Der (Armstrong & Gasche 2014, Family 15D, pl. 25), and Lagash (Renette 2021, Type HF-17). Hemispherical bowls with grooved bodies and

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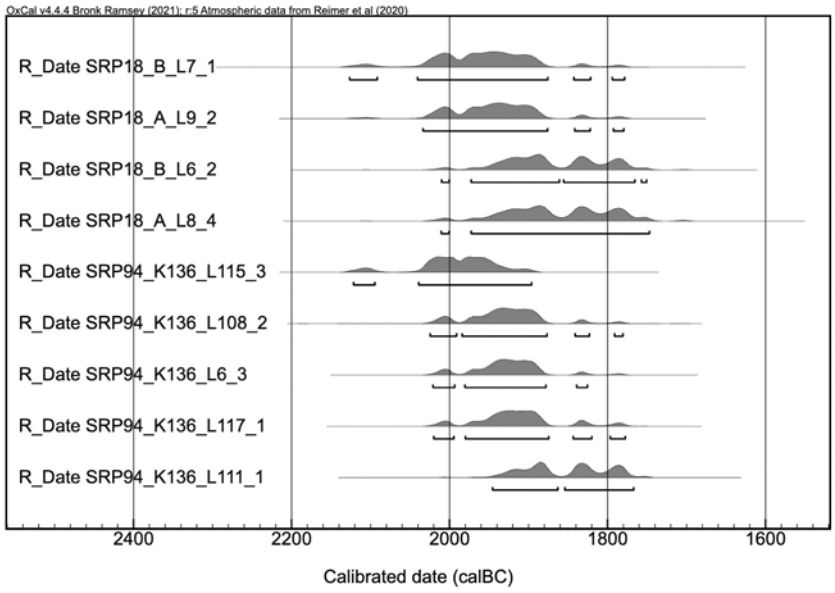


Figure 4. Multiplot of calibrated radiocarbon dates from Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi.

ledge-rim bowls have also been found elsewhere in the SRP survey region, at Chia Raza Tepe (SRP171), alongside a terracotta plaque with a nude goddess motif (Glatz *et al.* 2024, fig. 15.8–15). Such plaques are typical of MB I Tell Asmar (Rossberger 2018, 524), suggesting that at least some of Chia Raza Tepe's inhabitants may have participated in Ešnunnan ritual or religious practices.

Just one fragmentary example of a hemispherical bowl was recovered from Tepe Kalan (Fig. 5q), found mixed in with the Phase 2 wall collapse. Dominant at Tepe Kalan instead are straight-sided bowls and platters with inwardly bevelled, usually thickened rims (Fig. 5h–n, p, and s). Vessel sides are almost always straight and flaring, but one example is vertical and incurving (Fig. 5r); bases, where preserved, are wide and flat. Platters tend to be squat in shape, with a range of rim diameters that compare well with the range also observed across Kani Masi's types (range 180–330, avg. 231, n=10). Volumes are also varied, tending to be approximately 0.4–0.8 litres, and with one vessel reaching as much as 3 litres. Tepe Kalan's platters find strong comparisons at Tell Yelkhi Levels 5–4 (Gabutti 2002–03, tav. 33.2 and 33.12), and at sites in the Trans-Tigris, such as Tell al-Rimah (Postgate *et al.* 1997, pls 50–51) and Kurd Qaburstan (Schwartz *et al.* 2022, fig. 22.1–3). These platters were a well-integrated regional style across Babylonia too, becoming established in the northern alluvial plains in the mid-twentieth century BCE, and in southern Mesopotamia seemingly only in the mid-eighteenth (Armstrong & Gasche 2014, 15–16, Family 5C & 10D, pls 3–6 & 16; Renette 2021, 37–8, Type HB-6).

Interestingly, however, many of the platters recovered from Tepe Kalan have distinctive dark orange-pink fabrics, rough chaff and calcite inclusions and blue-grey cores indicative of low or reducing firing conditions (Fig. 5h–s; see also Calderbank *et al.* in review). They are hand-made and occasionally show signatures of extensive wet-smoothing, deliberate slipping, and even burnishing. This tradition of manufacture is very different to those used to produce the hemispherical and ledge-rim bowls from Kani Masi, and are instead far more typical of sites in the uplands to the north of the SRP survey area (Glatz *et al.* 2024, fig. 5.18.26–32). An s-shaped bowl from Tepe Kalan (e.g. Fig. 5o) even demonstrates strong similarities with the broadly contemporary Shamlu ware found mainly in the Shahrizor. Just a handful of other Shamlu-style wares have been identified in the SRP survey region, at Tepe Dar (SRP178) and Tepe Shaho (SRP106) (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 171–4). The latter site, which also has large platters of a similar style to Tepe Kalan (Glatz *et al.* 2024, fig. 5.18.31), produced in local fabrics and by local techniques, is located in the centre of the Hawasan valley, midway between the Sirwan river and the Darband-i Belula ravine.

A single sherd of an in-turned bowl, similar to those from Tepe Kalan, was found at Kani Masi (Fig. 5g), recovered from the accumulated alleyway of Phases 2–3, a place of waste deposition associated with episodic, and perhaps sometimes inter-community, feasting (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 156). The cream, fine-ware production of this vessel, however, is again very different to the manufacturing techniques used to produce these shapes at Tepe Kalan, therefore further accentuating the differences between the Kani Masi and Tepe Kalan tableware assemblages.

These stylistic inconsistencies point towards different dominant food cultures at Kani Masi and Tepe Kalan. The flat, open shapes of Tepe Kalan's platters, often with stable bases, would have rendered them awkward to handle. This meant that these vessels would probably have been static during use, but that their contents were highly visible and easily accessible, with the shape well suited for holding bread or perhaps larger cuts of meat. Hemispherical and ledge-rim bowls, on the other hand, with their rounded bases, are less stable and seem instead designed to be held individually or passed around. These vessels are probably more suited to stews or broths, of the kind outlined in the broadly contemporary Yale Culinary Tablets (Bottéro 2004). These different food habits may have contributed to the negotiation of power relations; responsibility for the carving of meat for instance, may have formed an expression of social hierarchy,

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Figure 5. Eating vessel types at Kani Masi (a–g) and Tepe Kalan (h–s).

while the sharing of meals in large bowls can embed aspects of social solidarity (Robin 2020, 379).

Drinking vessels at both sites demonstrate similarly complex patterns of stylistic overlap and difference. Present in significant numbers at Kani Masi are cylindrical beakers, with open mouths, concave-vertical sides and sharp carinations on the lower body directly above flat or slightly convex bases (Fig. 6a–b, d–f; Table 3). These are present at Kani Masi in a range of sizes; smaller versions are more numerous and finely made, with round or slightly thickened

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Table 2. Information on sherds provided in Figure 5.

Figure #	Sherd #	Rim di. (mm)	Base di. (mm)	Vol. (l)	Colour	Fabric	Notes
Kani Masi (SRP094)							
a	K136.3.2.2	250	–	–	Pink-cream	Chaff/grit	Fine incised bands beneath rim ext.
b	K136.7.1.1	150	–	–	Cream	Chaff	Fine incised bands beneath rim ext.
c	K136.3.5.1	–	–	–	Orange-cream	Chaff	Multiple impressed bands around body ext.
d	K136.6.2.2	280	–	–	Pink-cream	Chaff	–
e	K136.116.1.1	180	–	–	Green	Soft chaff	Folded rim
f	K136.6.2.3	280	–	–	Cream	Soft chaff	–
g	K136.4.1.7	180	–	–	Cream	Fine chaff	Finely made; wheel-finished
Tepe Kalan (SRP018)							
h	A.1.5.1	230	150	0.4	Pink-orange	Grey, chaffy	S-cut base
i	B.4.3.1	210	120	0.6	Pink	Chaffy	Roughly made; s-cut base
j	B.3.3.1	250	–	–	Dark orange	Grey, chaffy	Wet-smoothed
k	B.7.2.1	230	–	–	Dark orange	Grey, chaffy	–
l	A.5.2.5	190	–	–	Orange-pink	Grey, chaffy	
m	A.0.4	180	–	–	Pink-orange	Chaffy	
n	A.0.1	270	160	0.8	Pale pink	Dark blue	S-cut base
o	A.8.1.3	160	–	–	Orange-pink	Grey-blue, chaffy	
p	A.10.1.4	220	–	–	Pink	Chaffy	–
q	A.5.1.1	180	–	–	Pale green	Chaff	3 impressed bands beneath rim ext.
r	B.6.2.2	330	320	3.0	Orange	Brown, chaffy	Heavily burnished ext./int.; impressed band beneath rim ext.; preserved chaff fabric
s	A.5.2.2	–	–	–	Dark pink	Grey-blue, chaff/ grit	Slipped(?) ext./int.

rims that sometimes exhibit a black painted band on the interior and/or exterior (e.g. Fig. 6a). A single volume has been measured for a small beaker of approximately 0.4 litres (Fig. 6a). Larger examples are also present in smaller numbers; these beakers have wide, flat ledge rims, usually with incised grooves, as well as grooved or impressed decoration around the body. One such vessel from a burial at Kani Masi (SRP189) has a capacity of approximately 3.6 litres (Fig. 7).

These variously sized beakers perhaps formed part of a drinking set, and are attested in domestic and funerary contexts, where they often appear in connection with larger straight-sided or narrow-necked jars (Glatz 2025); corroboratory sets have previously been identified in the Hamrin, at Tell Halawa (Yaseen 1995, pl. 59–63, painted examples: pl. 62.44 and 62.48), Tell Yelkhi (Gabutti 2002–03, tav. 60–62 and 70), Tell Ahmed al-Mughir (Gibson 1981, 152–3), and the Diyala region, at Tell Asmar and Ischali (Delougaz 1952, 120, pl. 153), as well as at Kish (Langdon 1924, pl. 32). That a particularly fine small beaker (volume: 0.18 litre) with painted dots located beneath the rim was deposited in Burial 189.1 at Kani Masi, placed inside a larger beaker with grooved ledge-rim (Fig. 7), further emphasizes the functional and symbolic associations between these vessels and their centrality to processes of identity creation. Individual examples of these vessels have been found further north in the SRP survey region, at Qala Gawri (SRP061) (Glatz *et al.* 2024, fig. 5.18.1).

Metal versions of these distinctive beakers have also been found in MB graves in Lurestan (Begemann *et al.* 2008; Schmidt *et al.* 1989, pls 124, 126–7), and at Godin Tepe (Henrickson 2011, fig. 6.16). Cylindrical beakers of various

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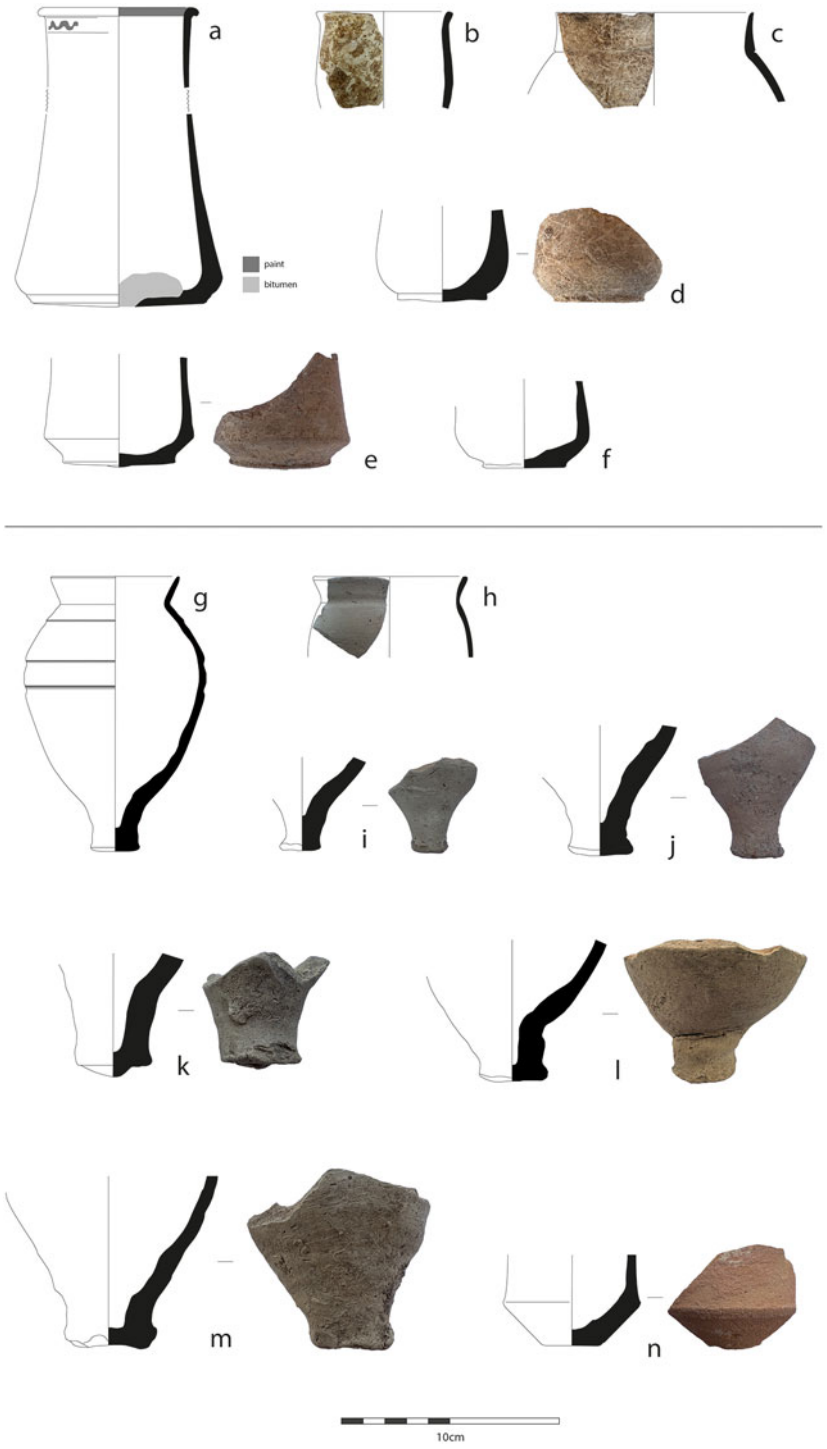


Figure 6. Drinking vessel types at Kani Masi (a–f) and Tepe Kalan (g–n).

sizes and typical hemispherical bowls of precisely the same shapes found at Kani Masi were also produced at Godin Tepe (Phase III:2; *c.* 1900–1600 BCE) of a local burnished grey ware, perhaps designed to imitate metals (Henrickson 2011, fig. 6.48). This evidence strongly points towards shared commensal practices between the transitional community of Kani Masi and surrounding highland communities, replicated in a range of materialities (see also Glatz 2025).

Such beakers show a far more mixed distribution in the lowland alluvial plains (Armstrong & Gasche 2014, Group 65, pls 52–54). According to Armstrong and Gasche (2014, 34–5), these vessels probably entered northern Babylonia from the Sirwan river valley in the early nineteenth century, with examples recovered at Tell ed-Der, but only became established in southern Babylonia later in the mid-eighteenth century, at Nippur, Larsa and Uruk. Interestingly, some of the southern examples, including a vessel from

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Table 3. Information on sherds provided in Figure 6.

Figure #	Sherd #	Rim di. (mm)	Base di. (mm)	Vol. (l)	Colour	Fabric	Notes
Kani Masi (SRP094)							
a	K136.6.1.1	74	82	0.43	Pale green	Fine	Smudged ext.; painted decoration on int./ ext. rim; bitumen on int. base
b	K136.4.2.3	60	–	–	Cream	Fine	–
c	K136.5.3.2	90	–	–	Cream	Fine	–
d	K136.4.3.1	–	40	–	Cream-pink	Fine	–
e	K136.6.2.1	–	51	–	Cream-pink	Fine	–
f	K136.4.1.4	–	38	–	Cream	Fine	S-cut base
Tepe Kalan (SRP018)							
g	B.4.2.1	75	22	0.24	Pale green	Fine chaff/ grit	Wet smoothed; impressed grooves around upper body; s-cut base
h	B.7.2.2	70	–	–	Cream-grey	Fine grit	Fine rilling; smudged ext.
i	A.6.1.1	–	19	–	Pale green	Fine grit	Slipped and smudged ext.; s-cut base
j	B.4.2.3	–	30	–	Pink	Chaff/ grit	Roughly formed; well-worn s-cut base
k	A.7.1.2	–	35	–	Pale green	Chaff/ grit	Roughly formed; s-cut base
l	A.5.1.6	–	32	–	Pink-pale orange	Chaff/ grit	Smudged ext.; roughly formed; s-cut base
m	B.6.1.1	–	40	–	Cream	Chaff	Smudged ext.; roughly formed; s-cut base
n	A.0.5	–	30	–	Orange	Sandy	–

Nippur (Armstrong & Gasche 2014, pl. 54.6), also exhibit a band of dark paint around the rim, the same as those from Kani Masi, albeit of a significantly later date.

These beaker shapes were not identified from stratified assemblages at Tepe Kalan, and only one example was recovered from extensive surface collections of the lower mound (Fig. 6n). Tepe Kalan's drinking assemblage instead comprised small, closed cups. These cups have simple rounded rims, short defined necks, round-to-ovoid bodies and narrow stump feet (Fig. 6g–m). Similar vessels are known from Bakr Awa (Miglus *et al.* 2013, fig. 14a), Tell Yelkhi Levels 4–3 (Gabutti 2002–03, tav. 67–69.1–6), Tell Halawa (Yaseen 1995, pl. 130-4), Tell Asmar, Ischali (Delougaz 1952, pls 151 and 170) and Kurd Qaburstan (Schwartz *et al.* 2022, 11, fig. 10.3). They are also very common at sites across the northern alluvial plains, and as far west along the Euphrates as Harrâdum, but only from the late nineteenth century onwards, as well as at Nippur and Isin in the mid-eighteenth (Armstrong & Gasche 2014, Group 170A, pl. 85). Just one probable neck and rim sherd of such a closed cup was found at Kani Masi Phase 3a (Fig. 6c), while further isolated examples have been recovered from SRP071, also in the Bnkura plain, and SRP113 in the upland terraces (Glatz *et al.* 2024, figs 5.17.20 and 5.18.36).

Cups at Tepe Kalan have been recovered in two main sizes: small and unstable, with foot diameters tightly clustering around 20 mm (18–22 mm), and larger more stable examples with foot diameters of 30–40 mm. Rim diameters, where preserved, are 70–75 mm, while one volume of 0.24 litre is recorded for a smaller cup (Fig. 6g). While the larger variety tend to be quite roughly produced and finished, some the smaller vessels are finely produced and relatively carefully finished, with incised/impressed grooves positioned around the shoulder. Regardless of the quality of production, cups were built using the wheel-coiling technique, in traditional second-millennium BCE style (e.g. Bürger 2011; Calderbank 2021, 51–3). Vessel surfaces regularly demonstrate heavy wet-smoothing and smudging, typical of the combination of water with manual pressure to join coils. Feet are invariably string cut. Unlike Tepe Kalan's bowls, the cups are produced almost exclusively of pale green-cream and evenly fired fabrics, thus indicating a divergent *chaîne opératoire* between these vessel families.

The stylistic differences between Kani Masi's beakers and Tepe Kalan's cups also assume performative significance. Both beakers and cups, where we can measure, seem to have fairly similar sizes and capacities (Table 3). Beakers, however, have an open shape, meaning that their contents would have been visible during consumption activities. Cups, on the other hand, have restricted necks, therefore concealing the contents and minimizing spillage. Furthermore, the instability of cups due to their narrow feet means that these vessels must have been held in the hand until the contents were drained, thus requiring either the quick consumption of drinks or else the passing of these vessels between individuals within a group.

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Figure 7. Beakers from Burial SRP189.1.



Figure 8. Cylinder seal with presentation scene from Tell Asmar (IM 192665) (Al-Luhaibi 2023, fig. 16).

This practice echoes prevalent contemporary imagery circulating in the late third and early second millennium BCE across Mesopotamia. The so-called 'presentation scene' on cylinder seals depicts a seated divinity or king holding a cup outstretched in one hand; before him stands a supplicant alongside an interceding goddess (Zajdowski 2013). The ubiquitous presence of the drinking vessel in these scenes is notable, and suggests that, when a vassal visited their sovereign, they were invited to drink, with this recursive gesture forming a core part of the physical language of political power (Michalowski 1994, 36–7). These images increased dramatically in popularity at Ešnunna during the early second millennium BCE (e.g. Al-Luhaibi 2023), with similar cylinder seal iconography also being used to depict Iddi(n)-Sîn (Shaffer *et al.* 2003, 31–5, figs 4–5). While the vessels depicted tend to be highly stylized, they almost invariably have flaring necks, far more in line with Tepe Kalan's cups than Kani Masi's beakers (Fig. 8).

Practised borderities in the Zagros Piedmont

A series of letters between Aradmu, an official of the royal court of Ur, and king Shulgi (2094–2046 BCE) reveal the multiplicity of Middle Bronze Age borderland dynamics in the lands of Subir.[5] For example:

> You have commissioned me to keep in good condition the expedition roads to the land of Subir, to stabilize the borders of your country, to make known the ways of the country.[6] (ArŠ1, trans. Kramer 1963, 331)

We see in these letters the ways in which semi-fixed built infrastructure, such as roads and earthworks, came together with values, customs and traditions, as well as displays of royal patronage, to construct ideational top-down geographies of power. Underlying this, we might also recognize the power of everyday actions—the *ways of the country*—in shaping political spatialities (e.g. Bauer & Kosiba 2016; Robin 2020), as well as a consequent desire to impose standardized

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behaviours and, importantly, a tacit acceptance that these everyday encounters were not entirely within royal control (see Michalowski 2011, 75, for similar arguments).

It is these points of encounter, negotiated through the material world, that archaeologists are uniquely positioned to identify. Yet archaeological practice has long been employed in the service of text-derived geographies of power, seeking to confirm the spatial and temporal reach of the state. The vibrant MB rock reliefs of the Zagros front ranges have been discussed almost entirely through the prism of state territorialities, interpreted as marking the extent of the military campaigns of Simurrum and thus delimiting its territorial borders (Alibaigi *et al.* 2020; Altaweel *et al.* 2012, 11). We instead argue that these landscape monuments were a multi-locational network of curated borderities, that is spatially distributed materializations of ongoing multi-directional power dynamics by which individual rulers and/or subversive groups attempted to incorporate complex landscapes and their diverse inhabitants (e.g. Glatz 2014; 2020, 152–74 for discussion of Hittite landscape monuments). Since rock reliefs were, by their nature, dependent on material affordances, such as the demands of a relatively flat workable rock face, their location must to an extent have been opportunistic; these were some of the only places in the region that they could have been carved. Rock reliefs and worked stele were therefore not the 'jacket of territory' but were 'one of multiple knots in a complex weaving' (after Amilhat Szary & Giraut 2015, 9).

Pottery vessels formed another of these archaeologically identifiable 'knots'. The production and consumption practices surrounding MB pottery provided regular arenas for the performance of identity and the consequent emergence of situated borderities. Close object-oriented analysis of the excavated pottery from non-elite contexts at Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi, located near to one another in the shadows of the contemporary rock reliefs, have identified assemblages that, while internally consistent, are stylistically very different from one another; local differences in commensal practice and sociality that go hand-in-hand with divergent settlement behaviours that suggest discrete forms of social organization (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 176–7, 369–70).

A traditional political-typological approach, in the absence of radiocarbon dates, might interpret these differences as markers of a chronological and/or political transition between an 'Isin-Larsa' assemblage (*c.* 2004–1790 BCE), characterized by cylindrical beakers with open mouths at Kani Masi, and an 'Old Babylonian' assemblage (*c.* 1790–1595 BCE), typified by closed cups with flaring necks at Tepe Kalan. The tight alignment of radiocarbon dates from the two excavated sites, however, coupled with the infrequent presence of distinctive crossover vessel types, establishes the contemporaneity of these two communities during the MB I (*c.* 2000–1850 BCE). A second traditional avenue of interpretation might therefore be spatial, with the material differences representing an imperial border fixed at the Sirwan river and/or at the line of the low-lying Gumar/Shakal-Mrwari ranges, separating the state-driven urban expansion of Ešnunna at Tepe Kalan (21 ha) from the non-state rural conservatism of Kani Masi (2 ha) to its northeast (for urban–rural critique, see Van Oyen 2019). While we are dealing with settlements of different scales, the excavated evidence suggests communities of a comparative non-elite social status and inter-regional connectivity.

It is therefore clear that none of the above interpretations plausibly account for the patterns presented in this paper. Instead, the data from these two sites highlights the limitations of traditional archaeological modes of analysis, which draw neat binary patterns from empirical messiness and, in so doing, exaggerate asymmetries of power and close down localized complexity (see Pollock 2011 for similar arguments). Both Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi demonstrate extended, albeit divergent, inter-regional networks (Fig. 9). Kani Masi's beakers and bowls show strong links with sites in the Hamrin and Diyala regions, as well as clear eastward connections stretching into the Zagros, where similarly shaped vessels were produced in metals and in distinctive localized grey wares (Glatz 2025). At Kani Masi, however, these vessels were produced by typical Babylonian techniques (van As & Jacobs 2014), with strong internal consistency in colour and fabric composition. The care shown for these vessels is testified by the comparatively fine wares of almost all beakers, while their centrality to community identity is attested by their inclusion in burials at the adjacent funerary mound (SRP189).

Tepe Kalan's assemblage, on the other hand, was composed of two main commensal vessel types: stump-footed cups and platters. Both were common shapes in the Hamrin and Diyala region and were apparently introduced into the assemblages of the northern alluvial plains during the nineteenth century BCE (Armstrong & Gasche 2014, 15–16, 53–4, Groups 5C, 10D and 170A–B). These two vessel families differ in their technological traditions. Cups were produced by typical Babylonian wheel-coiling techniques (Calderbank 2021, 51–3); some were skilfully manufactured, with fine fabrics and carefully finished and slipped surfaces, while others were roughly manufactured and finished, suggesting diverse origins of production, with some perhaps arriving at the site from elsewhere.

Cups appear to have been integrated within a set of formalized drinking practices that had taken hold across the region, best demonstrated in elite iconography emanating from Ešnunna. Tepe Kalan's community evidently bought into these emergent drinking customs. Tepe Kalan's platters, on the other hand, were handmade of localized red-orange fabrics, more typical of those identified at surveyed sites in the upland terraces, closer to the monumental rock reliefs, which share technological similarities with the distinctive Shamlu tradition of the Shahrizor (Mühl 2012, 89–90).

It is worth briefly reflecting on the social identities and organization of the communities of pottery producers servicing Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi. While it is generally accepted that MB I potters held a low social status (e.g. Wright 1998), the nature of potting activities and their relationship with centralized institutions—as attached or independent specialists (after Brumfiel & Earle 1987; Stein 1996), for example—is a subject of ongoing debate. Pottery, despite its archaeological abundance, is rarely mentioned in texts. Consequently, a small group of Ur III texts (*c.* 2050 BCE), which

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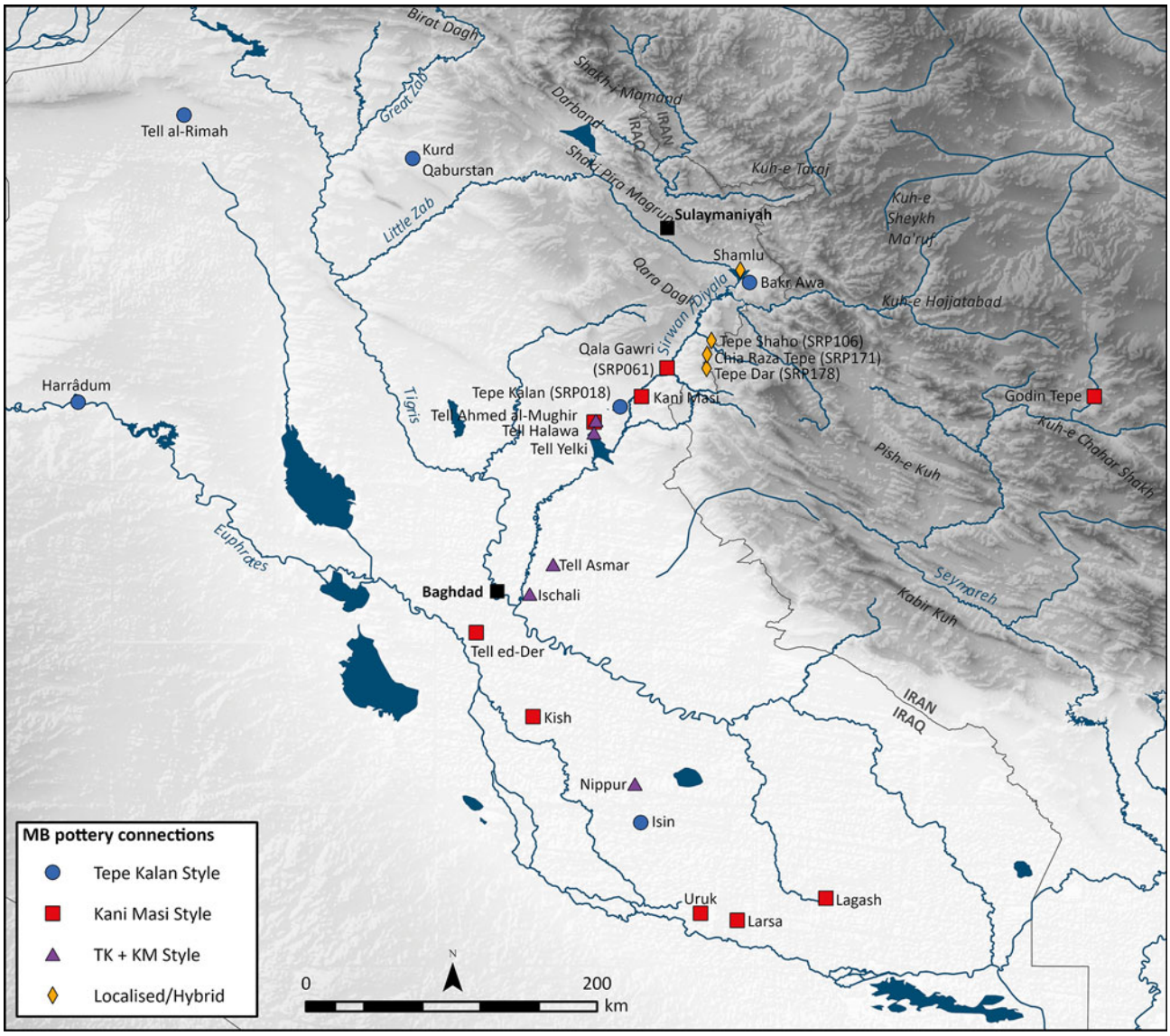


Figure 9. Network map of sites sharing eating and drinking vessels of Tepe Kalan, Kani Masi and localized styles. (Map: Francesca Chelazzi.)

tally a significant amount of labour still owed to the state apparatus of Umma from the previous year by two pottery workshops—totalling the equivalent of 33 workers operating for an entire year—have received excessive attention (Dahl 2010; Sallaberger 1996, 35; Steinkeller 1996; Waetzoldt 1970/71). Two points in particular have been taken from these texts: firstly, that they testify to the scale of production at these pottery workshops; secondly, that this evidence alongside Old Babylonian (van de Mieroop 1992, 104), Kassite (Sassmanhausen 2001, 96–7) and Middle Assyrian (Jakob 2003) ration lists suggests that Mesopotamian potters enjoyed the status of fully-fledged state dependents servicing elite institutions.

Yet this apparent dependency of potters on the central state serves to mask the everyday actions and interactions between potters and other craftspeople, known from various administrative texts, which assumed a much more independent form. We know, for example, that potters gathered their own raw materials (Steinkeller 1996, 242), passed their vessels to other specialists—brewers, millers, and oil pressers—to be filled with their respective products, and acquired various types of leather, hide and rope/cord for wrapping both empty and full vessels (Sallaberger 1996, 18–22; van de Mieroop 1987, 38). This organization, Steinkeller (1996, 251) refers to as 'indirect oversight' (for criticism, see Dahl 2010). And this is, of course, not taking into account the likely vast majority of entirely decentralized potting activities that left no textual record. A full picture of exactly how the potters of Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi were organized cannot be developed from the evidence presented here. Nevertheless, the diversity of co-existing technological traditions, within and between these sites, as well as variation in the care and skill of forming and finishing between individual vessels of the same shape type, strongly points towards decentralized and diverse communities of craft practice.

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It seems implausible that the communities of Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi would not have been well aware of each other's material and cultural practices. The conscious and repeated decisions not to integrate within the same technological and commensal networks are where borderities, those community relations and segmentations present psychologically, became materialized through the taskscape, the sum total of practices and actions performed by the inhabitants of the two sites, which in turn shaped their physical and conceptual landscapes (after Ingold 2000, 196). Curiously, the material differences between these two sites also endures through time. Once both sites were resettled several hundred years later in the latter half of the second millennium BCE, while Tepe Kalan's pottery assemblage demonstrates a meeting of Late Bronze Age cultural influences, with a mixture of Kassite- and Middle Assyrian-style wares (Calderbank *et al.* in review), Kani Masi's (SRP046) assemblage was remarkably homogenous, with almost no pottery types beyond its limited Kassite-style repertoire (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 272–4).

Similarly complex relationships were at play along the length of the Sirwan river valley. Looking to the Shahrizor plain, the sites of Bakr Awa and Gird-i Shamlu, located just 10 km apart, demonstrate starkly divergent Babylonian- and Shamlu-style pottery traditions (e.g. Al-Husaini 1962; Al-Janabi 1961). Furthermore, the surface assemblages from sites in the upland terraces of the Sirwan—Tepe Shaho (SRP106) and Chia Raza Tepe (SRP171)—exhibit mixed, hybrid materialities. Here, Babylonian-style shapes produced using hand-made, chaff-tempered and slipped/burnished wares of a local style, sit alongside more straightforwardly Babylonian-style cups and bowls, as well as lowland-style figurative art (Glatz *et al.* 2024, 171–4). Further south in the Hamrin, Tell Yelkhi has yielded vessels of both the Kani Masi and Tepe Kalan types merged within its Level 6–3 assemblages (Gabutti 2002–03; Oselini 2019), a complex assemblage which has puzzled researchers of Mesopotamian pottery (e.g. Armstrong & Gasche 2014, 11–12). These complicated connections and divergences are typical of multi-layered borderities, both between and within communities occupying the same landscapes.

Conclusions

The Sirwan river traverses multiple contemporary borders as it meanders from its source in the Zagros highlands in Iran through the intermontane plains of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, to reach its confluence with the Tigris in Iraq. Like many of the landscapes of Southwest Asia, this region has been deeply incised by colonial lines-on-a-map approaches to national borders (Jüde 2017; Khalidi 2016). Geopolitically charged public-facing bordering and de-bordering agendas have long been common across the region, into which the archaeological record has inevitably, selectively and uncritically been drawn, with interpretations seeking to align historical geographies with these modern boundaries. These practices fall into the tautological trap that Roderick Campbell (2021, 38) articulately summarizes: 'the spatial imaginations of nation-state dwellers project lines onto maps of ancient polities and then go looking for them in texts, potsherds and monuments'.

Contemporary critical border studies have confronted these normative approaches to state territorialities, conceiving of modern borders as mobile and continually emergent rather than fixed, physical and enduring. Amilhat Szary (2023, 1026) has recently challenged archaeologists to 'read the past in search of complex definitions of limits and interfaces'. A raft of scholars, drawing on archaeological contexts spanning the globe, have already taken up this challenge (e.g. Campbell 2021; Frangipane 2021; Glatz 2020; Grosby 2020, 235–8; Langer & Fernández-Götz 2020; Lightfoot & Martinez 1995; McCarthy 2008; Mullin 2011; Naum 2010; Parker 2006; Smith 2005; van Dommelen 2006); their case studies exhibit a variety of nuanced royal/elite-tinted views of territoriality and approaches to territorial subjugation, all of which are distinct from the bounded nation-state model, although often sharing aspects of its ideational aspirations; furthermore, these top-down territorial projections regularly clash with the spatial distribution of material cultures in their associated borderlands. Clearly expressed within all of these studies are the diverse ways in which socio-spatial identities emerge in the archaeological record, not only in colonial contexts, but also in more organically constituted socio-political encounters (e.g. Naum 2010).

This paper has focused on MB communities living along the Sirwan river valley, analysed through recently excavated pottery assemblages from the sites of Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi in the lower Sirwan, as well as survey data from across the region. The borders we have observed archaeologically in the Sirwan river valley were mobile. They existed largely in in the socio-spatial realm, as borderities, defined here as the multiple experiences of what a border can be. Their emergences were therefore diverse and multi–locational. Borderities could materialize as curated landscape monuments, positioned in opportunistic places, making sense only in relation to the material affordances of those locales (e.g. Ingold 2000, 192–3), or they could be made manifest through everyday recursive activities. These activities had the potential to unite, building bridges between individuals and communities across vast, disseminated space, but, conversely, had the power to segment across more immediate physical proximities, as was the case in the 14 km dividing Tepe Kalan from Kani Masi.

Tepe Kalan and Kani Masi's communities participated in diverse long-distance and none-contiguously distributed communities of practice, constituted by a range of pottery production techniques and commensal performances that were in various ways competing, contrasting and overlapping. These diverse material and cultural flows, while undoubtedly enabled and constrained by landscape features, such as rivers, valleys and mountain chains, were certainly not determined by them. They also do not map at all neatly with the historically defined geographies and imagined frontiers—of Ešnunna, Simurrum and Lullubum, for instance—that were largely projected by lowland kings and local elites.

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These findings, moreover, challenge the embedded archaeological concept that borders—as political constructs in the sovereign mind—are easily identifiable through clear divisions in the presence and/or absence of characteristic everyday material culture. What this paper explores instead are how diverse materialities, such as rock reliefs and pottery vessels, operated as relational points of encounter. Identifying the diverse emergences of these borderities allows archaeologists to escape the grip of state territorialities as their definitive ordering constructs and, in their place, encourages a reimagining of multi-locational and multi-directional constellations of community interaction, participation and rejection, as central to the continuous negotiation of imagined geographies.

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Notes

1 The Sirwan (Kurdish) transforms into the Diyala (Arabic) at its confluence with the Alwand in the Hamrin basin (Fig. 1). For clarity, we will use Sirwan only throughout this paper.

2 By which we refer to vessels lacking surface treatments beyond smoothing or otherwise decorative features (after Glatz 2015).

3 Publications on the material culture from these sites is extremely limited.

4 For information on the Late Bronze Age settlement of Kani Masi, see Glatz *et al.* 2019, 449–64; 2024, 181–332).

5 A region which, in the late third–early second millennium, Michalowski (2011, 72) believes to lie 'East of the Tigris in the mountains of Iran'.

6 While precise translations of ArŠ1 vary (e.g. Kramer 1963, 331; Michalowski 2011, 249–72), the substance of the texts remains consistent.

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