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BMCR 2020.04.26

## **Keramikassemblagen der Späten Bronzezeit aus dem Königspalast von Qatna und eine vergleichende Betrachtung zeitgleicher Keramik Westsyriens und der Levante**

Stephanie Döpper, *Keramikassemblagen der Späten Bronzezeit aus dem Königspalast von Qatna und eine vergleichende Betrachtung zeitgleicher Keramik Westsyriens und der Levante. Qatna-Studien. Ergebnisse der Ausgrabungen*, 7. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2019. 568 p.. ISBN 9783447109574 €198,00.

### **Review by**

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The book presents a study of a Late Bronze Age (LBA) ceramic corpus excavated by the German component of the Italian-Syrian-German archaeological mission in the ancient site of Qatna / modern Mishrifeh (Syria). The author's aim is to provide a detailed assessment of the formal and physical traits of the pottery assemblage and its relevance within the ceramic tradition that characterised Western Syria—and more widely the entire Levant—during the Late Bronze Age. The book is organised into seven chapters, including the introduction that opens the study. Chapter two is dedicated to the investigation method used by the author to classify and record the pottery: she relies largely on a procedure inherited from previous studies, involving a systematic subdivision of the ceramic corpus on the basis of morphological and physical traits that generates in turn a number of different sets of information that can be cross-referenced to identify patterns in the pottery production. Though there are no great innovations in this approach, the results are positive, giving a rather precise picture of the assemblages under examination. Of particular significance are the methods used to explore the data; after a brief explanation of the use of pottery for dating archaeological contexts and the importance of analysing the whole ceramic assemblage (rather than just selected types) so as to obtain a chronologically precise picture, the author discusses modern statistical techniques such as the Brainerd-Robinson coefficient, and in particular the use of Correspondence Analysis, a multivariate technique that has become increasingly popular in recent years as a statistical tool for pottery seriation.

The third chapter is devoted to a discussion of the archaeological contexts. These are two rooms (G and DK), a small palace sector (Bereich BU) and a tomb (Tombeau II). The first (Room G) and the last (Tombeau II) were excavated by the French Mission during the first excavation season directed by Du Mesnil du Buisson (Du Mesnil du Buisson, 1927, 1935); however, surprisingly the assemblages were abandoned there (the pottery from Tombeau II was probably left by the French excavator in front of the tomb's entrance, where the German mission found it more than 80 years later). This particular situation permitted the author to work on a large ceramic corpus. Room DK, on the other hand, is a recent discovery in the western sector of the Royal Palace; it contained a significant amount of ceramics that pertain to the destruction level of the Royal Palace (p. 49), i.e. phase G7b, dated to the LB IIA. Of particular note, from one of the uppermost G7 assemblages of DK came a sealing bearing the name of Akhenaton/Amenophis IV, which provided a *terminus* for the chronology of the pottery assemblage. The room is thus probably the best context examined here, since it offers the most solid and consistent body of data in terms of quality of the archaeological context and quantity of ceramic finds. Sector BU, on the other hand, yielded a similar or probably even larger amount of pottery, which in one area comes from six different stratified deposits dated to phase G7.

Chapter 4 deals with the study and analysis of the ceramic assemblages. After a synthetic description of the general aspects of each corpus, the author focusses on the analysis of the wares identified in the assemblages, defining the main traits characterising the pottery fabrics in each context and then comparing the four bodies of data. Percentages of the fabric types and the main inclusions are given. This allows the author to single out a significant difference between the assemblages under examination, in particular concerning those of Room G and Tombeau II. The classification of form types follows a similar approach, with a discussion of the relevant aspects and then of the assemblages from each context. Each macrotype (e.g. bowl) is then examined in more depth, with percentages of every subtype and the specific occurrences in each room. The chapter ends with a description of the functional aspects on the basis of five different categories, which permits the author to highlight the identification of specific homogeneous traits in each assemblage—such as in Room DK, where the ceramic assemblage consists mostly of kitchenware/tableware.

Chapter 5 gives a discussion of significant contexts chosen by the author in order to set the ceramic assemblages under analysis into a wider regional framework. Here she makes a remarkable attempt to take into consideration all of the LB settlements located in the Levant and western Syria. With 44 sites examined, the Levant (coastal Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine and western Jordan) is the predominant region, whereas inner Syria and the middle-upper Euphrates have respectively six and nine sites. The ceramic assemblages are then analysed via correspondence analysis techniques, which produce a differentiation that, as far as the LBA is concerned, is more regional and functional than chronological. A second step concerns the comparison of these assemblages with those studied by the author: this shows wider correlations for DK, BU and Tombeau II, whereas Room G seems to be more restricted. Chronologically, they range from the late Middle Bronze Age (MBA) to early LBA to the entire LB II.

The sixth chapter concentrates on the chronological arrangement of the assemblages analysed. This operation relies in particular on a few <sup>14</sup>C determinations that have yielded a more precise date for Room DK and to a lesser extent also for Sector BU. In the former case the <sup>14</sup>C results were quite consistent with an LB II (14<sup>th</sup> century) date, in agreement with the Akhenaton sealing, whereas the second set is more problematic, since they suggest a late 16<sup>th</sup>/early 15<sup>th</sup> century date, which is in contrast with the pottery that has been dated to the LB IIB. The author interprets this as the result of depositional processes that have emplaced much older remains than the pottery that was found in the area. Room G and Tombeau II, on the other hand, have been dated exclusively on the basis of

the ceramic assemblage. This, however, has allowed the author to propose only a rather generic LBA attribution for Room G (with a suggested LB I dating for the pithoi found there), whereas for Tombeau II the situation is more complex due to the mixed horizon of MB and LB ceramics that makes the assemblage's chronological position very difficult to establish. Lastly, Chapter 7 provides a summary of the results obtained. The book comprises 156 plates of pottery drawings, of which eight contain colour photographs of some of the most important pieces.

This study is unquestionably a solid piece of research and the author can only be praised for the work she has conducted on the ceramic assemblages from Qatna. This must not have not been an easy task, due to the quality of the assemblages under examination. The four contexts are spatially separated and hence they do not seem to provide a consistent body of information as a group. Further, two of them were excavated some time ago (Room G and Tombeau II), with assemblages that are likely to be contaminated—at least, as the author stresses (p. 393), in the case of Room G, with later material: most likely Iron Age, e.g. Taf. 21, K 1540. The ceramic corpus thus possesses some weaknesses that may call into question its fundamental usefulness as the basis for a new vision and interpretation of the LBA horizon of western Syria, the mid-upper Euphrates Valley and the Levant. Nevertheless, the author has tried to overcome these difficulties via a thorough examination of a number of different LB reference-sites from the entire region under study, against which she has compared the data from Qatna. This provides an overview of the entire LBA in the western Near East which is rarely found in other works.

I have only two criticisms to make, the first of which concerns the book's real impact on the archaeology of the LBA in the Levant and Syria. Although the author has laudably invested much effort in a massive analysis of the LBA evidence, one has the impression that she has not fully exploited the body of data that she built up from Qatna and the sites she examined. At present, the most important result is the suggestion that the regional and/or functional—rather than the chronological—traits have the strongest influence on the characterization of the LB ceramic sequences. In light of the breadth of the analysis, one would have perhaps expected the author to go deeper and compare this evidence with other relevant dynamics, such as, for example, the historical trends shaping the region across the 16<sup>th</sup> to the 13<sup>th</sup> centuries BC. If the pottery horizon seems to be characterised by such strong continuity during these centuries, how might this be interpreted in the context of the so-called International Age that sees cultural and artistic influences extend over a significant portion of the Levant and Mesopotamia (Mazzoni, 2000, pp. 144–146; Feldman, 2006; Liverani, 2009, pp. 400–401; Iamoni, 2012, p. 186)? Qatna was deeply involved in this commercial and cultural circuit (as the presence of ceramic imports and the number of precious artefacts found in the tombs testify): how does the result of this analysis fit in with the existence of regional boundaries of other material cultures? These are questions that have not been taken into consideration and that hopefully the author will consider in her future works.

A second remark regards the Correspondence Analysis (CA), which the author uses extensively to explore ceramic patterns in order to set Qatna's pottery in a regional context and, at a broader level, to provide a more general reassessment of the LB tradition of the Levant, western Syria and the mid-upper Euphrates area. This ambitious task has been carried out via a number of CAs that provide, according to the author, evidence in support of regional rather than chronological development (an attempt to produce a chronological pattern did not give the desired results; see pp. 208–210). However, the CA scatterplots are not adequately presented. CA is a statistical analysis that reduces into a low-dimensional space (usually a two-dimensional space such as a two-axis chart) the variability of the corpus which is frequently composed of several dimensions (for example a simple 10 x 10 table generates nine dimensions). The reduction of dimensions implies a loss of information; how much has been retained by the scatterplot(s) is defined as a percentage of the total "inertia": the higher this value, the more reliable is the pattern obtained for any subsequent

interpretation (Greenacre, 2007, in particular pp. 29-31 and 169-174). This fundamental information is absent and one can only assume that its value is high (at least 50%). Lower percentages would imply the scarce significance of the pattern, which in this case would be unreliable or even meaningless.

A minor comment regards the study of the fabrics: these have been evaluated on the basis of physical descriptions as well as external traits (e.g. red-slipped pottery), which from a methodological point of view mixes two types of evidence. A series of petrographic and chemical analyses would have helped to cluster the fabric types into well-characterized— i.e. geologically and chemically determined—groups. This would ultimately have permitted comparison of this body of data with other LB ceramic traditions on a more solid basis.

In conclusion, Döpper's work is a most welcome book, especially for those interested in the second millennium archaeology of the ancient Near East and the Levant. It contributes to an improvement of our knowledge of the LBA ceramic tradition, providing the basis for further in-depth analyses that may provide new insights into the Late Bronze Age in western Syria and the Levant.

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