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ABSTRACT

Three vessels with an exceptionally rich theriomorphic decoration were found in the main temple on the top of the citadel at Tell Bazi (Syria). Residue analysis indicates their use for libation offerings of beer and wine. Apparently they had been used as ritual vessels in the temple during the Mittani period. When they fell out of use, they were ritually discarded inside the sacred area.

KEYWORDS

Late Bronze Age, Syria, ritual vessel, residue analysis, pottery, Mittani, temple

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STORIES TOLD AROUND THE FOUNTAIN



*Papers Offered
to Piotr Bieliński
on the Occasion
of His 70th Birthday*

Polish Centre of Mediterranean Archaeology University of Warsaw

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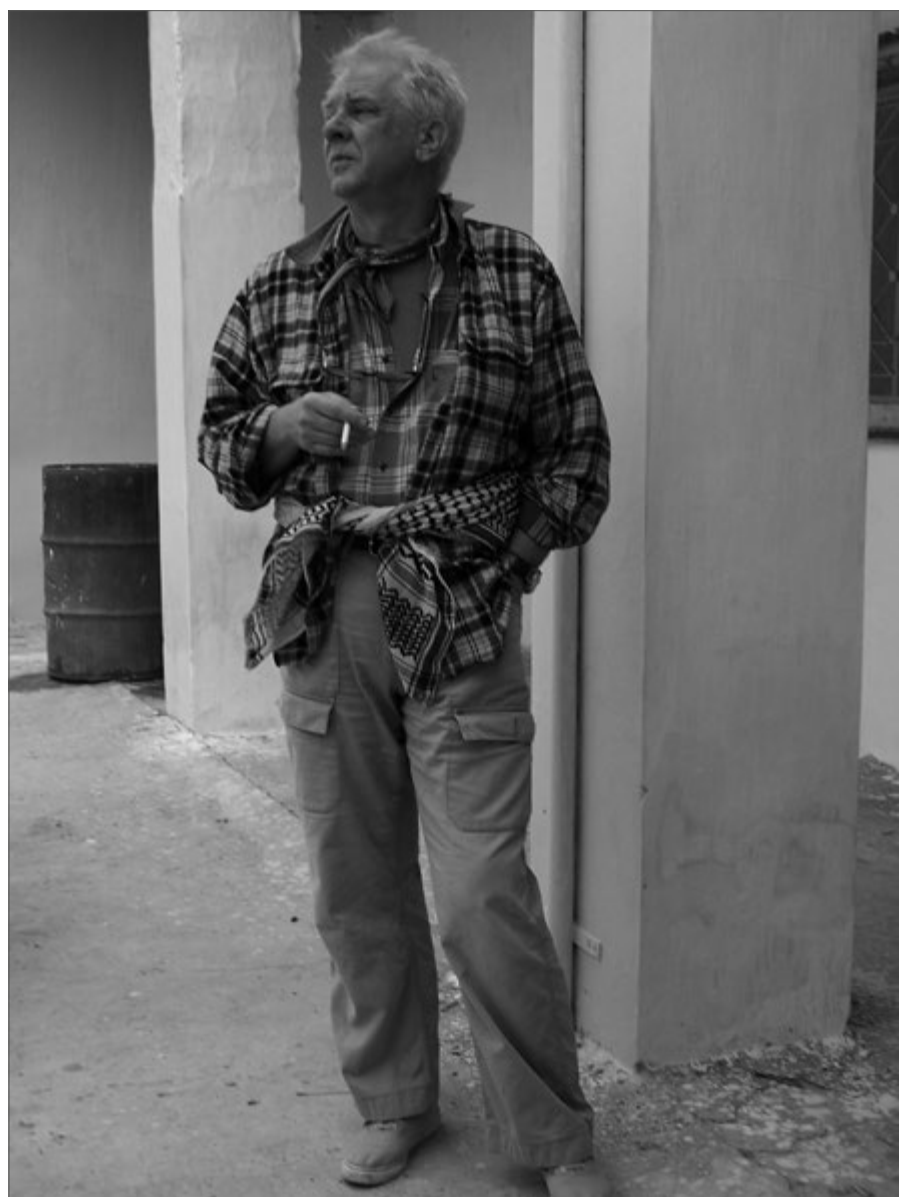
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Three ritual vessels from the Mittani-period temple at Tell Bazi

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KEYWORDS

Late Bronze Age, Syria, ritual vessel, residue analysis, pottery, Mittani, temple

ABSTRACT

Three vessels with an exceptionally rich theriomorphic decoration were found in the main temple on the top of the citadel at Tell Bazi (Syria). Residue analysis indicates their use for libation offerings of beer and wine. Apparently they had been used as ritual vessels in the temple during the Mittani period. When they fell out of use, they were ritually discarded inside the sacred area.

This short note in the form of three humble ritual vessels from Tell Bazi is presented in friendship and gratitude to our dear friend and colleague Piotr Bieliński. As he has excavated highly interesting Ninevite 5 period temples at Tell Arbid (Bieliński 2013), we hope he will not object to material from a “younger cousin”, the temple at Tell Bazi.



Cults and rituals are important elements of most cultures. They are by no means restricted to special localities or buildings—primarily temples—as there is a lot of textual and archaeological evidence of domestic cult in residential houses, especially from the Late Bronze Age. However, the sacred buildings in individual settlements used to be the central places for rites and cult, and thus the objects found in them differ from those found in secular buildings. The three vessels that are presented here were found in a Late Bronze Age temple at Tell Bazi. They are very special in form, size and especially decoration, and they differ considerably from the ceramic inventory of contemporary residential houses; hence they will be referred to as ritual vessels. With the help of residue analyses, it is even possible to determine their function.

Findspot

Temple 1 on the top of the Citadel at Tell Bazi was erected in the Middle Bronze Age II period (Einwag and Otto 2012). It was still in use when the region came under the domination of the Mittani Great kings. Although the rulers resided far away in the Khabur region, they clearly ruled over ancient Bašīru (Tell Bazi), where at least two of the Mittani Great Kings, Sauštatar and Artatama I, established settlements (Sallaberger, Einwag, and Otto 2006). The temple continued in use through the end of the Late Bronze Age I around 1340 BC, when the whole city, including the temple, fell victim to violent destruction, probably caused by the Hittite expansion to the South.¹

The temple underwent several major changes during its lifetime: in Phase 1 it was a *templum in antis* with a large main room B (inner dimensions 10.5 m by 21 m) and an open entrance porch A. In the second phase, the former entrance porch was transformed into a room (Room A), and the main entrance was transferred to its northeastern side. Life-sized lion orthostats, which had originally adorned the central main entrance in Phase 1, were installed at the side entrance (Einwag and Otto 2012, including a discussion of the phasing). In the third phase, Room B fell out of use, while Room A remained functional as the sole cultic room of the temple. The former main entrance door to Room B was blocked, and there seems to have been no more access to the room [Fig. 1].

¹ For a detailed discussion on the date and chronology of Tell Bazi and other Late Bronze Age sites along the Upper Syrian Euphrates, see Otto 2018; for Tell Bazi, see Einwag and Otto 2018.

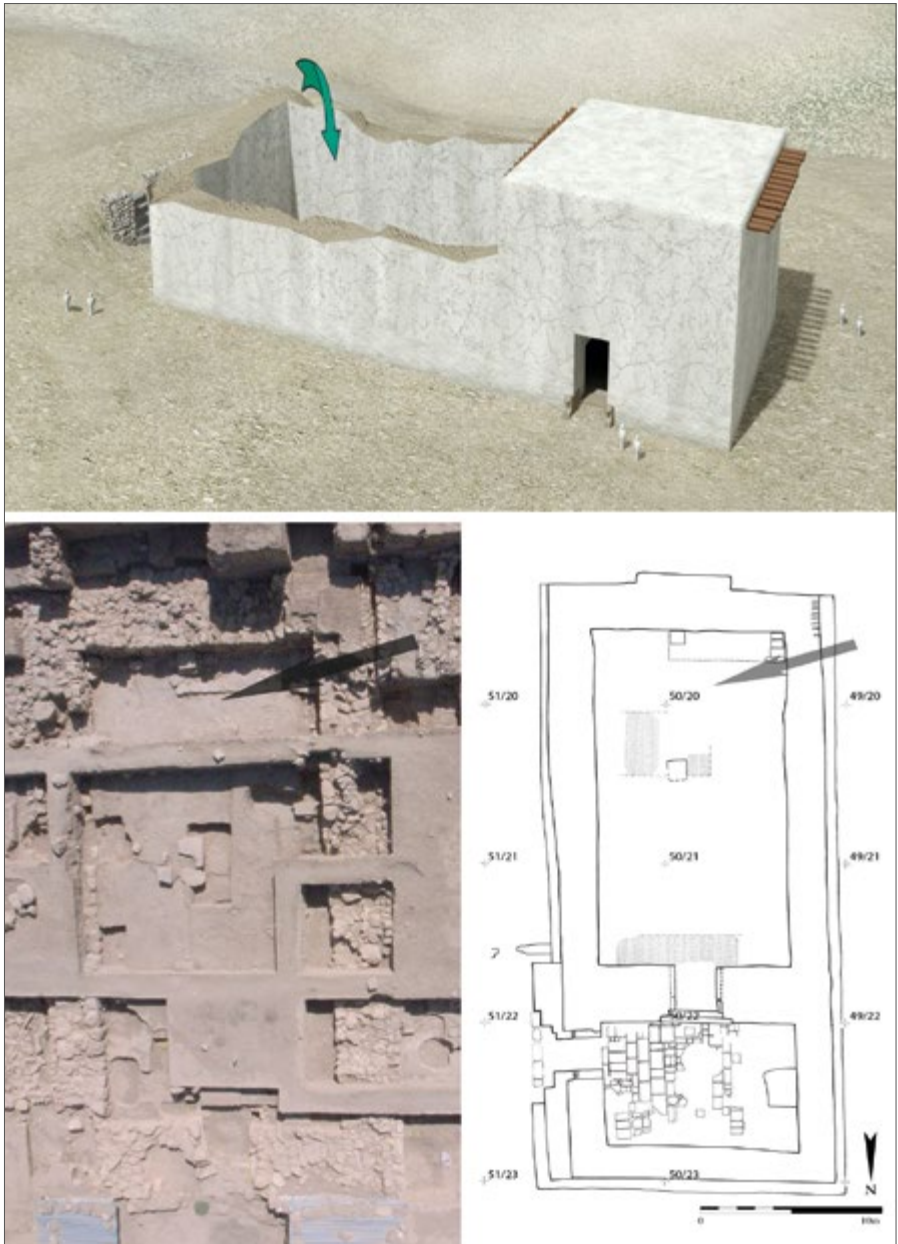


Fig. 1. Temple 1 from Tell Bazi in Phase 3: bottom, aerial photo and plan; top, 3D image; the arrows mark the direction of throwing waste into Room B (Tell Bazi archive/photo and plan B. Einwag, 3D imaging S. Hinz & S. Franz)

Thin layers of clean mud superimposed inside the chamber indicate that the roof was missing and that the floor was exposed to rain. Nevertheless, the room remained “in use” in a singular way as an area for discarding “special” rubbish. A 1.50-m-thick layer of packed, superimposed waste was encountered in the southern half of Room B, sloping heavily toward the floor from the southwestern corner of the chamber. In this area, the temple wall was still preserved to a height of 2.80 m, including two courses of mud bricks 10 cm high, rising above the high stone socle of the wall. The floor level outside the temple reached the height of the uppermost mud bricks of the temple ruin, the rubbish from this surface overlying the topmost mud brick of the temple wall. Thus, it was assumed that the waste was thrown into Room B from the open area outside the southwestern corner of the temple, as indicated in the 3D reconstruction [see *Fig. 1* top]. This resulted in a heavy sloping of the refuse levels: from some 374.31 m in the southwestern corner down to 372.40 m further inside the room. The archaeological context and the date of the associated material enable dating the debris layers back to the Early Late Bronze Age IB, approximately around 1450 BC (MC).



Fig. 2. Findspots of the fragments of three ritual vessels in the southwestern corner of Room B of the Tell Bazi Temple (Tell Bazi archive/drawing B. Einwag)

The dump comprises a mix of ashes, animal bones, human and animal terracotta figurines, beads and potsherds. The percentage of decorated pottery and vessels of special function is unusually high, greatly outnumbering the same originating from residential areas: there are fragments of several *kernoï*, which are hollow rings with animal spout(s?) and beakers, vessels with applied female figurines, and the said three vessels with animal decoration or theriomorphic spouts.

Fragments of these three vessels were scattered over an area of about 49 m² (7 m by 7 m) in the southwestern corner of the chamber. Their documented position in the field reflects the sloping nature of the deposits, values varying from 374.31 m in the southwestern corner of the room (corresponding to the uppermost preserved bricks of the temple wall) to 372.40 m further to the east [Fig. 2].

Description

Nothing remains of the three vessels apart from these photos and drawings. The sherds were found and collected in the 2007 and 2008 excavation seasons, and quickly assembled, restored, photographed and drawn during the study season in 2010. They were to be restored completely in 2011, but then the war broke out. The sherds were stored in the excavation house until 2015, when the so-called IS invaded the area, plundered the stores in the excavation house and presumably took everything to Raqqa. Assuming the artifacts were not destroyed at this time, pieces may yet appear one day on the antiquities market.

RITUAL VESSEL I

Jar decorated with a band of quadrupeds and incised lentils [Fig. 3]

Bazi find numbers: Bz 50/20:324, 50/21:34, 50/20:123, 50/20:124, 50/20:300;
additional fragments from lots 502065, 502080 and 5020107

Findspot: 50/20 East and 51/20 West, uppermost level 1

Dimensions: Height preserved 22 cm; wall thickness 0.9 cm; rim diameter 38 cm;
maximum diameter 50 cm; weight 3351.5 g

Material: Terracotta, coarse ware, slightly porous clay, black and grey inclusions,
core 2.5 YR 5/6 (reddish yellow), surface 2.5 Y 8/2 (buff)

Fragmentary upper half of a large, decorated jar. High cylindrical, slightly concave neck. Thickened rim with small projection inside. Its upper side is decorated with short, parallel incisions. The outer edge of the rim is adorned with applied lenticular blobs of clay approximately 1 cm in diameter, incised

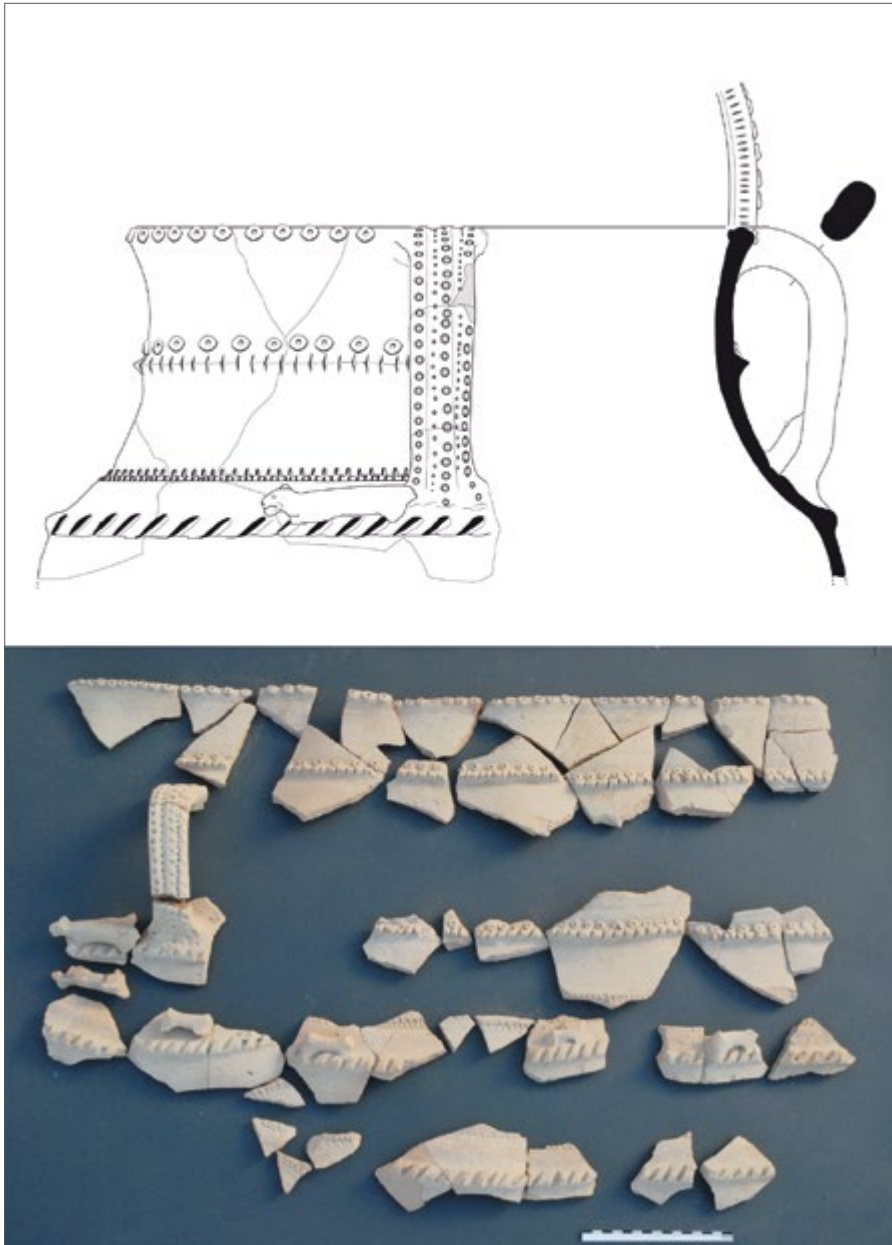


Fig. 3. Jar decorated with a band of quadrupeds and incised lentils; opposite page, close-up of three sherds with quadrupeds in relief (Ritual vessel 1) (Tell Bazi archive/photos A. Otto, M. al-Roumi, drawing M. Lerchl)

with a central dot, spaced about 0.5 cm from one another. In the middle of the neck, above a band with deep vertical incisions, there is another row of similar lenticular blobs. Two horizontal rows of small vertical incisions mark the joining of the neck to shoulder.

One handle of rectangular section and rounded edges vertically connects the rim and shoulder. Two vertical grooves divide the top of the handle into three embossments, each one adorned with rows of circular punctures (approximately 0.5 cm in diameter), the recesses with smaller dots (approximately 0.3 cm in diameter). The handle was reinforced on the inside at the point of its lower attachment.

The shoulder is marked with an applied band bearing broad oblique incisions. Several animal figurines used to be attached to the shoulder above this band. Seven animal figurines were preserved in total. They are handmade and feature an elongated, cylindrical body and four legs. The legs of one side stand on the embossment, the legs of the other side and the belly rest on the sides. The animals can be categorized in two types. Two of them, facing left, are fairly large (8.5 and 9.5 cm long). They have long tails flattened at their right sides. Their heads are almost cylindrical, with a broad snout. Two dots above their lowered muzzles mark the nostrils. The eyes are also pierced and look to the front. The clay at the top of their heads is pulled up laterally, forming pointed ears. Their front paws are marked by lines. One of the embossments bears remains of the paw of a third animal, indicating thus that there must have been at least three specimens of this cat-like species, which is presumed to be either a lion or a leopard.



By contrast, the other five animal figurines face right and are smaller (4–6 cm). Their tails are very short, pointing upwards. Heads and necks of all these figurines are broken off. Their short tails may indicate that they are representations of goats, gazelles or deer. Remotely comparable decoration on a bottle from Munbaqa features deer oppositely arranged on trees, with at least one animal exhibiting a comparably short tail (Mbq 7823; Czichon and Werner 2008: 252, Pls 225, 320). Also, the quadrupeds and clay lentils applied on a vessel found at Emar in the sacred complex M may be deemed vaguely comparable (Caubet 2014: 72, Pl. 1a).

The order of application of the figurines as well as the distance between them is not easily determined. It might have been a row of animals of the same kind approaching one another or, equally likely, the motif might have consisted of two kinds of animals arranged antithetically in the traditional manner of representing beasts of prey chasing quadrupeds.

Similar jars are documented for Tell Bazi in levels of the early Late Bronze Age I (16th/15th century), but they are of smaller size and were not decorated (Coppini 2018: Figs 6.5, 8.9). The form resembles even a late Middle Bronze Age vessel from the Citadel's Northern slope (Szelaq 2012: 147, Fig. 12:6). It would mean that the vessel may have been at least 150 years old when it was thrown away. Two roughly comparable vessels are documented from Munbaqa. One of them does not exhibit any adornment except for a red slip, but has two exceptional vertical handles in the form of a plaited braid (Czichon and Werner 2008: No. 7097; from House O in Ibrahims Garten, level II-Mbq-5/4). The neck of the other vessel from House AQ in Ibrahims Garten, level II-Mbq-3, is decorated with applied female figurines (Czichon and Werner 2008: No. 7140). Since this vessel form is noticeably older than the level in which it was found, it must have been stored there for more than a hundred years.

The residue analysis of fragment Bz 50/20:324 proved to be positive for tartrate, which suggests the vessel may have been used as a wine container.

RITUAL VESSEL 2

Vessel with a tunneled rim and theriomorphic spout (ram) inclined to the inside (“Mitanni spouted bowl”, as a similar bowl from Tell al-Rimah was called, see Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997: 98, Pls 20–21) [*Fig. 4*]

Bazi find numbers: Bz 50/20:217, 50/20:349, 502080.4

Findspot: Sloping layer of sherds in the southwestern corner of Room B [see *Fig. 2*]

Dimensions: Height preserved 8.3 cm; wall thickness 0.7 cm; rim diameter 39 cm; maximum diameter 50 cm; weight 828.5 g

Material: Terracotta, fine sandy, slightly porous clay, color 2.5 Y 8/4 (beige-light orange)



Fig. 4. Ritual vessel 2 with theriomorphic (ram) spout (Tell Bazi archive/photos A. Otto, M. al-Roumi, drawing M. Lerchl)



Six rim fragments of a vessel with applications of animal heads; the rim is tunneled, the walls slightly inclined. Enough survives to show the way in which the rim was formed: another rim was applied on the outside about 2.5 cm below the single rounded rim, thus forming a groove approximately 1.2 cm deep. An animal head was applied on the inner side of the rim, projecting 4.7 cm inward; the neck of this animal head is horizontal, oval in section, 3.2 cm wide. The snout is convex on its upper side and rounded at the tip, the lower end is broken off. The eyes are applied lenticular, dotted blobs closely spaced above the snout. Pointed ears protrude from both sides of the forehead, each wrapped around a helix-shaped ram's horn. The right ear and horn are broken off.

The ram's head—the representation is obviously that of a ram—was pierced from two sides on the head's axis; the 0.5 cm thick perforation joined the groove in the rim. Apparently, small amounts of liquid poured into the tunneled rim were meant to trickle into the vessel through the snout of the ram.

The vessel must have been a pot in shape. Its surface is fairly burnished horizontally. A handle with oval section, 3.8 cm wide, was applied at the rim. Since almost three-quarters of the rim has been preserved, it seems unlikely that the vessel featured more than one ram's head. It was positioned probably opposite the handle.

A residue analysis of fragment Bz 50/20:349 was tested positive for tartrate, while Bz 50/20:217 was tested positive for oxalate. Thus, the vessel seems to have been used for libations of both wine and beer.

RITUAL VESSEL 3

Vessel with tunneled rim and theriomorphic spout (bull) projecting inward (“Mitanni spouted bowl”) [Fig. 5]

Bazi find numbers: Bz 50/20:218, 502080.4, 502080.5

Findspot: Sloping layer of sherds [see Fig. 2]

Dimensions: Height preserved 14 cm; wall thickness 0.9 cm; rim diameter 44 cm; maximum diameter 50 cm; weight preserved 635 g

Material: Terracotta, middle fine sandy, slightly porous clay, color 10 YR 8/4 (light green-beige)

Three rim and two handle fragments of a vessel with an animal head appliqué and sigmoid flaring sides ending in a tunneled rim. The vessel must have been of pot shape. Its inner and outer surfaces were horizontally burnished, and the imprint of a cord runs horizontally along its rounded body. Its neck is horizontally adorned with two embossments and a thin ridge setting off the shoulder. The rim is recognized here as being made of a second rim applied approximately 2.2 cm

below the inner rim, which is slightly bent inwards and single-rounded, forming a groove approximately 0.9 cm deep. The outer rim is overhanging, bent upwards at an angle and notched by a horizontal groove on its outer face.

A relatively abstract animal head, but obviously intended as a bull's head, is applied on the inside, 1.2 cm below the inner rim, projecting 4.7 cm inward. The head is sitting on a short horizontal neck and is slightly bent downwards, ending in a circular snout. Two upward-pointing tapered horns are applied laterally on the top of the head. Ears and eyes are missing. A perforation 1.1 cm in diameter runs through the head both at the tip of the snout and below the chin (the latter apparently by accident), connecting with the groove to form a spout. The perforation seems to be in line with the channel departing from

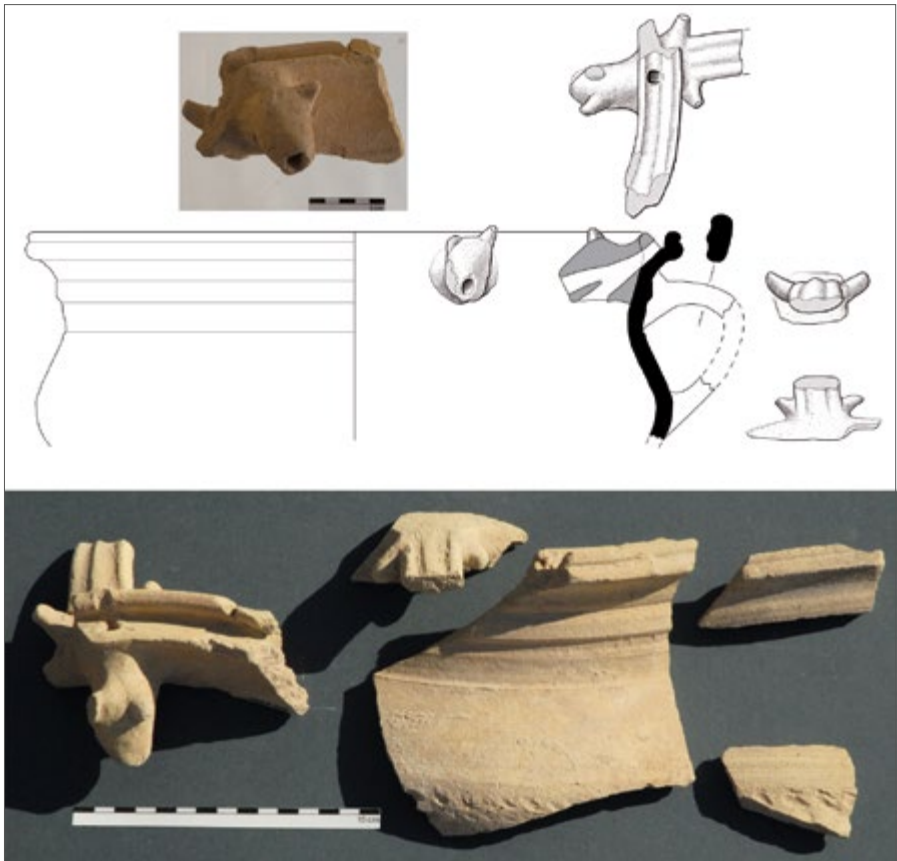


Fig. 5. Ritual vessel 3 with theriomorphic (bull) spout (Tell Bazi archive/photos A. Otto, drawing M. Lerchl)



the groove. The perforation affected also the inner side of the outer rim, which shows a depression. On the outside, a handle is applied at almost the same height as the animal's head, i.e., 3.1 cm below the outer rim. Small "horns", 1.1 cm long, protrude laterally at the point of attachment; their edges are blunt, rectangular-to-oval in section. The handle, rectangular in section, has rounded edges, and is longitudinally double-grooved on its upper side. It is joined to the body of the vessel in a slight arch. Two horn-like clay protuberances decorate both sides of the point of attachment of the handle.

Two vessels from Mittani-period levels 6 and 5 at Tell Sabi Abyad exhibit comparable handles with "horns" (Duistermaat 2008: 149, Fig. IV.26.a, 225, Fig. IV.64.g).²

The residue analysis of fragment Bz 50/20:318 tested positive for oxalate, which suggests the vessel's function as a libation jar for beer.

Conclusions

The three vessels presented here are unique in the ceramic repertoire of Tell Bazi. All three are medium- to large-sized vessels with vertical handles and elaborate decoration. Two of them, vessels 2 and 3, clearly served libation purposes. Their form already suggests that some liquid must have been poured carefully into the shallow groove of the rim, from where it trickled down slowly into the vessel through the animal snouts. The residue analyses of the pots from Bazi prove that both beer and wine were poured into these vessels.

Comparable tunneled rims are extremely rare. Not a single vessel from the houses at Tell Bazi, Munbaqa, Emar or other Late Bronze Age sites features such a rim. Only one similar vessel with a tunneled rim and a theriomorphic spout has been recorded to date: a "bowl with ram's head spout" was found together with four potstands in a Mittani building not far from the shrine at Tell al-Rimah (Postgate, Oates, and Oates 1997: 37, Pls 20 and 64, No. 612). As a matter of fact, the circumstances of this exceptional find at Tell al-Rimah, as well as the bowl's association with four potstands, which is exceptional as well, make the present authors wonder whether the building had not served as a place of storage for ritual equipment.

² Interestingly, Duistermaat (2008: 373) thinks that these vessels could have been imported to Sabi Abyad.

Vessel 1 must have been a fairly large jar. Its high cylindrical neck was decorated with a band of crouching quadrupeds, possibly felids and caprids, decoration that is so far unique at Tell Bazi. Residue analyses have hinted at its connection with wine.

Although the three vessels are unique at Tell Bazi, they must have been made on site: the fabric, ware and technique are in no way different from the locally produced pottery. Also, similar ram's heads were found attached to terracotta basins or to hollow-ring libation vessels (so-called *kernoï*) (Otto 2006: 102, Fig. 45,4a). Therefore, it may be assumed that they had been specifically produced in the settlement as exceptional vessels for ritual purposes.

All three jars were found in the sloping rubbish levels inside Room B, the former cella, which had by then been abandoned. They must have been produced in the early Late Bronze Age I (16th–15th centuries) and were found in rubbish layers from the 15th–14th centuries. This means that they had been exposed or stored somewhere for at least one hundred years. Since the sherds of vessels 2 and 3 were found mixed, it may be assumed that not only were they disposed off together, but they may have also been set up somewhere as a pair before.

If we take into account the limited space inside the then active cella in Room A and the continuous offering of new objects in this room, the discarding of ancient cultic material should be regarded as a regular procedure. However, it is uncertain whether these vessels had indeed been kept in Temple Room A. They may also have been stored elsewhere in the temple area, for example, in the nearby secondary rooms, as was the case at Munbaqa/Ekalte, for example, where most of the cultic equipment had been stored in small rooms around Temple 4 (Blocher et al. 2007).

The fragmented vessels were associated with refuse that differed from normal household waste and can be tentatively interpreted as remains of the equipment and rubbish from a temple. Since there would have been ample room outside the temple area and especially on the citadel slopes, where rubbish could have been easily disposed off, this material must have been deliberately thrown into the former cella from an elevated point outside the southwestern corner of the temple. Thus, it may be concluded that the vessels were ritual vessels once used in the temple. They were either discarded because they had been broken or they were deliberately broken into small pieces before they could be thrown away.

The ritual burying of objects, which had been offered to or used in a sacred place, is widely attested for the Near East. It seems that these objects were supposed to remain inside the sacred area and were therefore either ritually buried under the floor or inside a wall, or were discarded into *favissae* inside the temenos area, or—as in the case of Tell Bazi—in the no longer active ancient cella of the city's main temple.



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