

# THE JEZIRAH BURNISHED WARE\*

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## **Abstract: The Jezirah Burnished Ware**

The discovery of the Jezirah Burnished ware in the sacred area of Tell Barri (north-east Syria) dating back to the Early Jezirah II (2700-2600 BC) reveals a fundamental ostentatious function of this pottery, where the aesthetic sense and symbolic value prevails over any practical function. We can hypothesize that the local production of Jezirah Burnished ware was inspired by the original models from the Anatolian highlands. The production of the Jezirah Burnished ware may have been controlled by the local elites who organized the religious activities, using this pottery in strong relationship with the concept of identity to differentiate themselves from the rest of the community.

**Keywords:** Tell Barri – pottery – rural shrines – cultural identity

## **Resumen: La cerámica bruñida Jezirah**

El descubrimiento de la cerámica bruñida Jezirah en el área sagrada de Tel Barri (noreste de Siria), que data del Jezirah Temprano II (2700-2600 a.C.), revela una fundamental función ostentativa de esta cerámica, donde el sentido estético y el valor simbólico prevalecen por sobre cualquier función práctica. Podemos pensar como hipótesis que la producción local de la cerámica bruñida Jezirah pudo haber estado controlada por las élites locales que organizaban las actividades religiosas, utilizando esta cerámica en fuerte vinculación con el concepto de identidad para diferenciarse ellas mismas del resto de la comunidad.

**Palabras Clave:** Tel Barri – cerámica – capillas rurales – identidad cultural

Tell Barri is located in northeast Syria, between the ancient sites of Brak and Hamidiyah, and between the modern cities of Qamishlie and Hassake. In more

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than 25 years, under the direction of Prof. Pecorella† of the University of Florence, 15 soundings have been excavated, with levels dating back to the late IV millennium BC until the Islamic period (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup>

The sacred area excavated in Tell Barri<sup>2</sup> between 2002 and 2005, and dating back to the Early Jezirah II<sup>3</sup> (hereinafter EJ) was completely built with mud bricks and made up of two buildings interpreted as shrines (fig. 2 and 3): the rectangular room with bent-axis arrangement (single-room shrine 1297), and the multi-room complex 1548, in which the *cella* was accessible from a court, with a kitchen and two small storage rooms. Both the shrines present a box altar on the short side, and in front of it, a small bench with an oval fireplace.<sup>4</sup> The shrines were located around a large open space (a *temenos*) which presented on the SW side a storage building composed by two *siloi*.

With this preliminary contribution, we hope to call the Jezirah archaeologists' attention to the discovery at Tell Barri, during the excavation of the sacred area, of a significant amount of pottery fragments characterized by a strongly burnished surface.<sup>5</sup> Before this discovery, this class of pottery was almost nonexistent in the Jezirah.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, at the beginning of the excavation, we believed that the Jezirah Burnished Ware<sup>7</sup> (hereinafter called JBurW) was "imported." Now, based on the recent discoveries in Tell Arbid,<sup>8</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Pecorella 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Pecorella and Pierobon 2005, Valentini 2006a.

<sup>3</sup> For the chronology used in this contribution, see the periods proposed in the "Atlas of Preclassical Upper Mesopotamia" (Pruss 2004: 13-16). To specify the chronology of the sacred area, we noted that its ceramic assemblage belongs to an homogeneous horizon, that reveals strong parallels with Leilan IIIId level, with the pottery of Brak, excavated in the HS4 trench (level 5-4), and with the pottery excavated in the Level 3 at Raqa'i (Valentini 2004; 2005 and 2007).

<sup>4</sup> The presence of the fireplaces indicates that food offerings, probably contained in small pottery vessels, were burnt in the shrines. The box-altar, probably covered by a wooden table and open on the short side, could be used for presentation or storage of offerings and as support for the animal and human clay figurines (Valentini 2006a). Under the beaten floor of the shrines, inside small pits, were buried incomplete skeletons of foetus and newborns. For a preliminary interpretation of these burials as foundations or propitiatory rituals, see Valentini 2006b.

<sup>5</sup> I would like to thank Elena Rova and Anna Smogorzewska for the fruitful discussions we have had about this pottery over the past two years.

<sup>6</sup> With regards to the published material, we know only of a few fragments coming from Tell Leilan (IIIId level), that are described as a "new pottery type, highly burnished grey or black which occurs with carinated bowls" (Calderone and Weiss 2003: 199) and a few fragments from Tell 'Atij (Early Jezirah II-IIIa), described as "céramiques noire et rouge polie et céramique beige brunissée" (Boileau 2005).

<sup>7</sup> At the beginning of our studies, we called this pottery "Jezirah Polished Ware" (Valentini 2004), but later we decided on the new definition because it is more correct considering the technology. We used a definition consistent with those used in the studies by M. Lebeau on the *Jezirah Bichrome Ware* (Lebeau 2003) and by A. Pruss about the *Jezirah Grey Ware* (Pruss 2000 and 2001).

<sup>8</sup> P. Bieliński and A. Smogorzewska: pers. comm.

and after more accurate studies, we can consider it to be a peculiar “ware” that was distributed in the Khabur basin around the second quarter of the III millennium BC.<sup>9</sup>

The JBurW from Tell Barri can be divided in two different types:

- The A Type (fig. 4: b-d) is characterized by a fine and compact paste with a tiny quantity of small-size mineral inclusions. The surface of the vessels is strongly burnished<sup>10</sup> and presents different colours that seem to relate to the shapes. The open shapes (fig. 5) are coloured grey, orange, light pink or buff.<sup>11</sup> These are curved convex bowls, often slightly carinated, but only on the external profile, with a simple or imitating beads rim and rounded or mini-flat, occasionally convex, bases.<sup>12</sup> The grey, brown or orange-red colour, the squat and bi-conical shape, the everted rim, short neck and rounded base are all common characteristics of the small jars (fig. 6).<sup>13</sup> All the A Type vessels are well-fired and have thin walls.

- The B Type vessels (fig. 4: a) are characterized by a medium fabric, being less compact than the A Type, with lime and straw inclusions. The quantity and size of these inclusions are generally larger and greater than in the A Type vessels. The surface is strongly burnished and grey, grey/brown and black in colour. The B Type is attested only in the shape of internal/external carinated bowls with slightly everted imitating beads, or with a simple rim and flat base (fig. 7).<sup>14</sup> The B Type vessels tended to be thicker-walled and less-fired than the A Type examples.

Evidence of wheel manufacture is visible both on the A and B Types, for example in the horizontal lines on the surface, or in the regularity of the thickness of the vessel wall. Some examples of A Type jars and B Type carinated bowls may be in part handmade and in part finished on the wheel.

At Tell Barri the JBurW (A and B Types) is attested in the Phases V-T (EJ II),<sup>15</sup> corresponding with the life of the sacred area, and it is associated to the Late Excised Ninevite 5. Phases U-T (Late EJ II), beside the presence of Late Excised Ninevite 5 and JBurW, show the spread of the Early Metallic ware. In

<sup>9</sup> Without chemical analysis of the ceramic it is not possible to determine if the Tell Barri “Jezirah Burnished Ware” was produced *in situ*.

<sup>10</sup> Burnishing was probably achieved by rubbing or by smoothing with the use of wood or bone objects.

<sup>11</sup> Diameter: between 9 and 16 cm; height: between 5 and 9 cm.

<sup>12</sup> The wall above the carination is generally convex and only in few cases is straight. It is interesting to note that in Tell Barri this shape is also rarely attested in the “Kitchen Ware” (Valentini 2007).

<sup>13</sup> Diameter: about 5 to 15 cm; height: about 5 to 30 cm.

<sup>14</sup> Diameter: between 8-18 cm; height: between 5-15 cm.

<sup>15</sup> Valentini 2004; 2005 and 2007.

the Phases S-R (EJ IIIa-b), the JBurW is attested in a very low percentage and only with the carinated bowls of the B Type (fig. 2).<sup>16</sup>

In the Khabur region, the JBurW (A and B Type) is only attested at Tell Barri and Tell Arbid.<sup>17</sup> At Tell Leilan only a few examples of the grey/black carinated bowls (B Type) were found in the IIIId level.<sup>18</sup> One fragment was found also at Tell 'Atij.<sup>19</sup> Due to the scarcity of parallels in the Khabur region and to our hypotheses on the shapes and treatment surface, we turned our attention outside the Jezirah, believing there to be a "connection" between the JBurW and the Early Transcaucasian/Red-Black Burnished Ware<sup>20</sup> (hereinafter called ETW/RBBW).<sup>21</sup> In particular, these two kinds of pottery show the same surface treatment and are attested in the same type of carinated bowls, as demonstrated by the examples found in the Upper Euphrates region at Korucutepe (Early Bronze I),<sup>22</sup> Tepecik (Early Bronze II-IIIa)<sup>23</sup> and Pular (Early Bronze I).<sup>24</sup> Whilst the ETW/RBBW was strictly handmade, the JBurW was normally wheel finished, and this may confirm its local production.<sup>25</sup>

With regards to the relationship between the Transcaucasian region and the Jezirah, according to C. Marro,<sup>26</sup> we can presume that these contacts occurred sporadically through nomadic groups and their annual transhumance between the highlands and the steppes.<sup>27</sup> This type of relationship also leads us to

<sup>16</sup> The grey, carinated bowl (fig. 7) is the only example of JBurW that we found in Tell Barri even in the levels dated back to the EJ IIIb period (2500-2350 BC). These later examples present a richer number of inclusions in the paste that resembles the one of the *Grey Ware* vessels (Valentini 2007).

<sup>17</sup> P. Bieliński and A. Smogorzewska: pers. comm.

<sup>18</sup> Calderone and Weiss 2003: 213, fig. 8:5.

<sup>19</sup> Boileau 2005. One example of this shape is attested by a carinated bowl associated with Late Excised Ninevite vessels found in a burial, possibly dating back to the EJ II, at Tell Mohammed Diyab (C. Nicolle: pers. comm.). In this case however, the bowl presents a non burnished surface buff in colour. Examples of carinated bowls similar to those of the JBurW and without burnished surface are also attested at Tell Arbid (A. Smogorzewska: pers. comm.).

<sup>20</sup> For more details about this pottery, see the references in P. de Miroschedji (2000).

<sup>21</sup> Valentini 2006a; 2007.

<sup>22</sup> van Loon 1973: 402: pl. 7B and 404: pl. 9A.

<sup>23</sup> Esin 1979: 66: fig. 3-4.

<sup>24</sup> Koşai 1976: fig. 60, 103, 112, 106, 141. A similar shape is attested also at Hama in the Early Bronze I pottery (Thuesen 1988: pl. XLIV: 9).

<sup>25</sup> I would like to thank M.-C. Boileau who this idea confirmed to me, analysing the photos of the Tell Barri' JBurW. As regards to the technological difference between wheel-finishing and wheel-shaping methods in the pottery production, see Boileau 2005: 39-54.

<sup>26</sup> Marro 2004.

<sup>27</sup> A similar phenomenon was still documented at the end of the XIX century for the Turkmen nomads. Contact could be made in two ways, the first, via the Euphrates, between western Syria and the Malatia-Elaziğ region, and the second, via the Tur 'Abdin mountain pass of Mardin, which connects the Transcaucasian region with the Jezirah (Marro 2004). This kind of relationship seems to be confirmed by the sporadic nature of the imported fragments of ETW/RBBW found in Jezirah

understand in greater detail the presence in the sacred area at Tell Barri of small portable hearths with the shape of horseshoe, “snout,” or cylinder with two horns.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in the Anatolian sites, these kinds of object are usually associated with the ETW/RBBW.<sup>29</sup>

For the JBurW and subsequently for the portable hearths, we can presume that the local production was influenced by original models which derived from the Anatolian highlands. The JBurW, influenced by a production made originally for utilitarian and domestic use (ETW/RBBW) may have subsequently served ritual purposes.<sup>30</sup> This pottery may have been evaluated differently at the two ends of the exchange, particularly because culturally-speaking, different communities were involved.

At Tell Barri all the JBurW fragments come from the sacred area of the Area G (fig. 1), apart from the carinated bowls of the B Type, which were in use also after the abandonment of the sacred area and a small jar found in the burial 1309 (fig. 6:9).<sup>31</sup> It is interesting to note that there is no JBurW in Area B (fig. 1) where, during the 1980's, the excavations uncovered a residential area with several examples of domestic architecture, contemporary with the sacred area.<sup>32</sup> Considering the evidence of the context, we can suggest that JBurW (A and B Types) were probably used for serving food during celebrations or to present offerings to the deities inside the shrines. We can presume that JBurW was produced in Tell Barri for local consumption and that its production was

at Tell Mozan (Buccellati and Kelly-Buccellati 1988: 26-27) and Chuera (Kühne 1976: 105-106 and tavv. 39, 9-10), and in the Middle Euphrates region at Halawa B (Lüth 1981: 47 and tavv. 11.3, 56.7) and Tell Hadidi (Dornemann 1988: 17 and figs. 11.9, 10) and by the vessels in Metallic Ware found in Anatolia at Norsuntepe, Arslantepe and Tepecik (Marro 1997).

<sup>28</sup> Valentini 2006a.

<sup>29</sup> Some scholars, on the basis of the interpretations of the Pular anthropomorphic andirons, assigned them ritualistic properties, although often coupled with a domestic contexts (Smogorzewska 2004 and Takaoğlu 2000). Some other elements of comparison between Jezirah, and Anatolian and Transcaucasian regions can be found in the kitchen pottery excavated in Tell Barri and in particular on the peculiar types of lugs (Valentini 2007).

<sup>30</sup> Many goods have multiple functions and a specific good may be viewed as both being a symbol of prestige and as having a useful if not essential and utilitarian function. The multiple use of goods as household items, burial, and ritual goods suggests that the categories of “utilitarian” versus “sumptuary” goods are not as discrete as archaeologists have tended to consider them, and perhaps should best be interpreted as different ends of a continuum (Wattenmaker 1998: 4-5 and 199; Whitehouse 1996).

<sup>31</sup> Valentini 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Biscione 1998. It is also important to underline that the only contemporary parallels published for the JBurW (B Type) come from the Administrative Building excavated in the Leilan Acropolis (Calderone and Weiss 2003). The funerary context of the carinated bowl (similar to the B Type) excavated at Tell Mohammed Diyab in a tomb dated back to the Late Ninevite 5 period (C. Nicolle: pers. comm.) is also significant. At Tell Arbid the JBurW (A and B Types) was excavated in the settlement of the Late Ninevite 5 period that also includes a single-shrine similar to the Tell Barri shrine 1297 (P. Bieliński and A. Smogorzewska: pers. comm.; Bieliński 2006: 3-5).

“controlled” by the local elites, who organized the religious activities.<sup>33</sup> If we monitor the technology (use of the potter’s wheel and burnishing) and the degree of shape standardization, we could consider this ware as a “specialized production.”<sup>34</sup>

The fact that the JBurW was used in a ritual context shows that it also had an important symbolic value. Furthermore, it seems that the aesthetic value prevailed over the practical function of this pottery. The ostentatious value of the JBurW may have been revealed when the vessels were used during the rituals in shrines or when serving food during ceremonies. In these occasions the pottery had a high degree of visibility because of its portability and size, and would have been therefore used as a “medium of information”<sup>35</sup> or as a “social marker.”<sup>36</sup>

The JBurW, as the ritual objects, was used by the elites in their dynamic role of communicating with the people<sup>37</sup> and was used ideologically as symbols of power, to convey both information of a social nature and to differentiate themselves from the rest of the community.<sup>38</sup> In this sense, messages delivered on pottery vessels might be a result of increased vertical complexity (social status of individuals), but, on the other hand, we can also suggest a connection with a horizontal scale to convey information about ethnicity and group affiliation within the population.<sup>39</sup>

To conclude, we can imagine that the Tell Barri settlement, during the EJ II period would have been inhabited by a small community in which elites controlled a local economic system based on the exploitation of surplus products by agricultural and breeding activities. These elites could also increase their power through benefits derived from long-distance trade between southern Mesopotamia cities and the Anatolian highlands.<sup>40</sup> In this scenario, as documented by the Jezirah rural shrine,<sup>41</sup> we register an escalation and

<sup>33</sup> We can hypothesize that a “nucleated production” in spatially segregated workshops possibly operated independently and was not administrated by any political intervention (Wattenmaker 1998: 4).

<sup>34</sup> We can suggest that when the competition was intense, standardization and greater homogeneity of specialist-produced pottery (in our case the JBurW) would have facilitated the communication of specific messages (Douglas and Isherwood 1979: 145).

<sup>35</sup> Recchia and Capat 2004: 225.

<sup>36</sup> Wattenmaker 1998: 17; Hodder 1982: 45.

<sup>37</sup> In this case, the value of an object depended on its culturally assigned role within a specific information system and not on its real value (Wattenmaker 1998: 4).

<sup>38</sup> Valentini 2007.

<sup>39</sup> Hodder 1982: 56. That could explain the presence of the JBurW also in a domestic context as in the case of Tell Arbid (P. Bieliński and A. Smogorzewska: pers. comm.).

<sup>40</sup> Valentini 2006a.

<sup>41</sup> Schwartz 2000; Matthews 2002; Valentini 2007.

reorganization of ritual activities that we could interpret as part of the effort by the elites to communicate and sustain new ideologies and the particular own cultural identity. As a consequence, the mobilization of surplus by elites would be institutionalized in the form of religious rituals, making the activity to be part of the natural order of things.<sup>42</sup> With regards to the pottery, the elites may have continuously developed new styles, for example the JBurW, in order to set themselves apart and stay a step ahead of the non-elites imitating these styles.<sup>43</sup>

The intensification of political and economic complexity into the rural Jezirah was due to several factors, and, in part, to the emulation of the southern Mesopotamian models of authority, even if adapted to local circumstances.<sup>44</sup> We can hypothesize that the renewed contacts with the Lower Mesopotamia complex society led the local chiefs to group together to consolidate and affiliate in order to resist external threats.<sup>45</sup> As a consequence, on a local level they developed a larger-scale political system culminating in the spread of the Second Urban Revolution. This background of shifting leadership, centres of power and political boundaries and movements of populations, may have contributed to the rapid changes in the social identities.

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<sup>42</sup> Durkheim 1965 [1912].

<sup>43</sup> For the EJ II period we have to consider also the use of others example of specialized pottery production as the Ninevite 5 or the Jezirah Bichrome Wares. These potteries gradually decrease since the EJ IIIa to disappear in the EJ IIIb (fig. 1), a period characterized by a diffused standardization of the wares and the shapes, referable to an administrated and centralized production related with the state formation phenomenon (Lebeau 2000: 167-192; Valentini 2007).

<sup>44</sup> Schwartz 1994; 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Akkermans and Schwartz 2003.

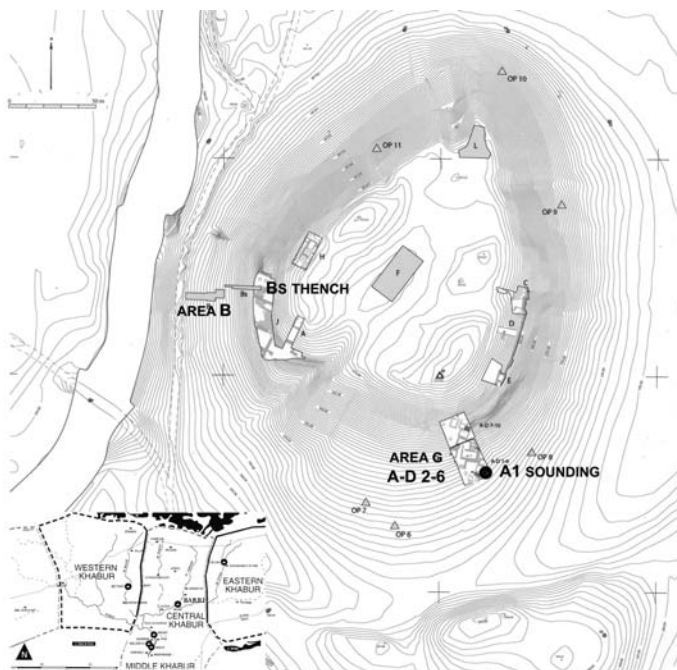


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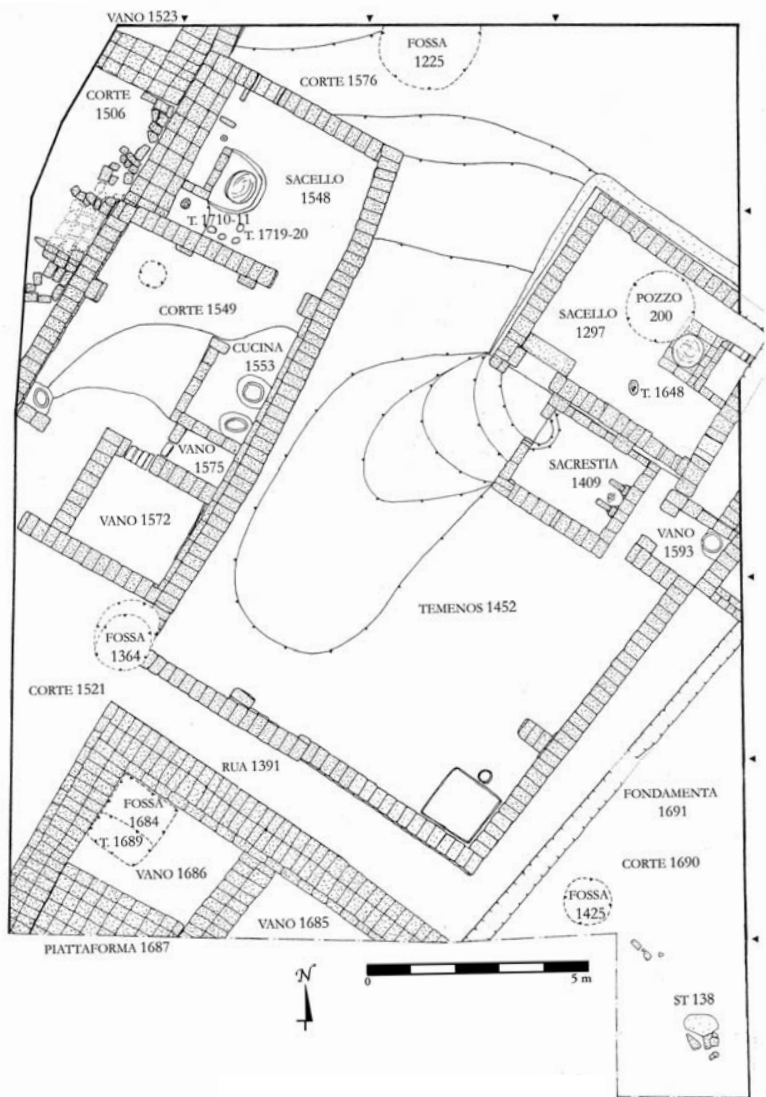
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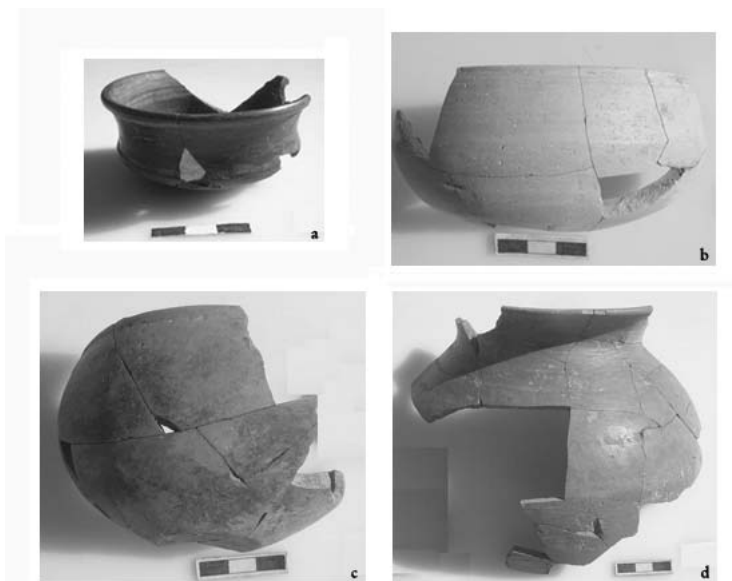
**Figure 1.**  
Topographic map of Tell Barri.

<b>AREA G</b> (1999-2005) A-D 2-6	<b>POTTERY</b>	<b>PERIODS</b> Early Jezirah	<b>OTHER SITES</b>
<b>PERIOD I</b> Phase W, Stratum 45 Sacred Area Foundation	LATE INCISED/EXCISED NINEVITE 5	<b>EJ II</b> (c. 2700-2650)	
<b>PERIOD I</b> Phase V, Strata 44-43 Sacred Area (Sh. 1297 - 1548)	LATE INCISED/EXCISED NINEVITE 5 J. BURNISHED WARE	<b>LATE EJ II</b> (c. 2650?)	Leilan III d (Strata 17-15) Brak J (HS4:5-4; HL1:3-2; HF1:4) Raqa'i 3 'Atij (Late Excised)
<b>PERIOD J</b> Phase U, Strata 42-41 Sacred Area (Sh. 1297)	LATE INCISED/EXCISED NINEVITE 5 J. BURNISHED WARE METALLIC WARE	<b>EJ IIIa</b> (c. 2650-2600?)	
<b>PERIOD J</b> Phase T, Stratum 40 Sh. 1297 (Reconstruction)			
<b>PERIOD K</b> Phase S, Stratum 39 Abandonment	LATE INC./EXC. NINEVITE 5 (?) J. BICHROME WARE METALLIC WARE J. GREY WARE	<b>EJ III a</b> (c. 2600-2500?)	Leilan II a (Strata 14-13) Brak K (HL1:1; HF1:3) Raqa'i 2 Melebiya 2
<b>PERIOD L</b> Phase R, Stratum 38	METALLIC WARE J. GREY WARE POTTERY STANDARDIZATION	<b>EJ III b</b> (c. 2500-2350)	Leilan IIb Brak L

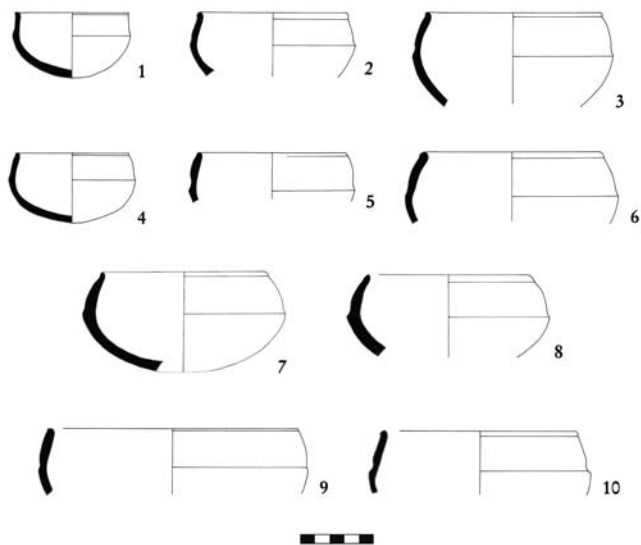
**Figure 2.**  
Chronological Sequence of the Barri Sacred Area.



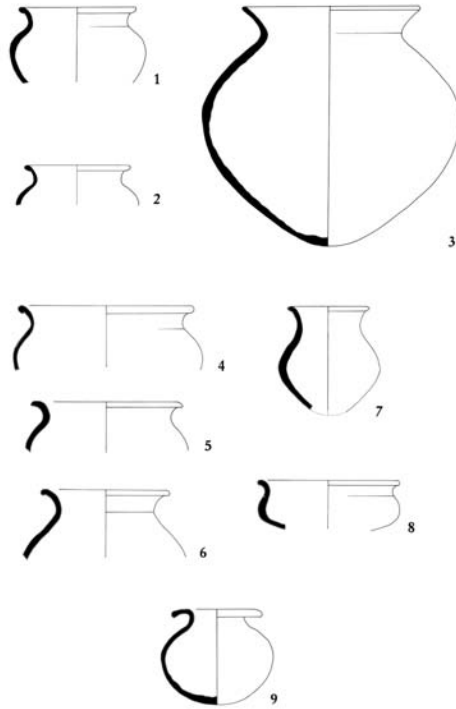
**Figure 3.**  
Tell Barri (Area G). Sacred Area.



**Figure 4.**  
Jezirah Burnished Ware from the Shrines of the Area G.

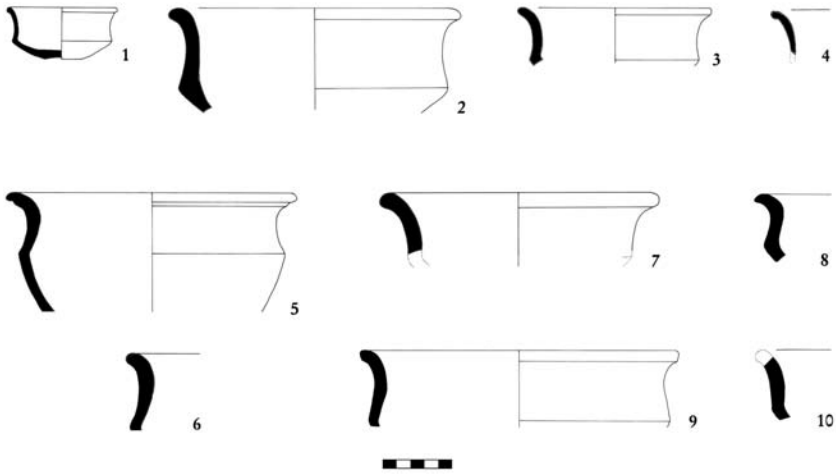


**Figure 5.**  
Jezirah Burnished Ware. A Type Bowls (n. 1-6: Phase V; n. 7-10: Phases U-T).



**Figure 6.**

Jezirah Burnished Ware. A Type Jars (n. 1-3: Phase V; n. 4-8: Phases U-T; Phase S).



**Figure 7.**

Jezirah Burnished Ware. B Type, Carinated Bowls (n. 1-4: Phases U-T; 5-6: Phase S; 7-10: Phase R).