

Characteristic pottery with a distinctive, painted decoration is the most reliable factor for identifying the Ubaid culture which gave its name to one of the periods of Mesopotamian prehistory. Ubaid pottery spread from southern Mesopotamia, where its earliest examples have been found, to the larger part of the ancient Near East in the 6th and 5th millennia BC. Apart from Mesopotamia, vessels of the Ubaid tradition have been discovered at sites in northern Syria, eastern Anatolia and western Iran, but also in the Gulf area: present-day Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

Ubaid pottery, manufactured throughout two millennia, underwent in this time some changes, as far as both the form and the decoration of the vessels is concerned. Archaeologists have distinguished a few phases in the development of the pottery, from Ubaid 1 to Ubaid 4, later supplementing this division with two more phases – Ubaid 0 as the earliest and Ubaid 5 as the terminal one.

In the Ubaid period, pottery was manufactured by hand, without a fast potter's wheel (which was an invention of a later Uruk culture). In forming the vessels coiling, and slab building techniques were employed. In the later phases of the Ubaid culture, the potters used also a "slow potter's wheel" (tournette) which significantly sped up the production of vessels.

Among the most characteristic forms of the Ubaid pottery there are carinated bowls, spouted jars, delicate hemispherical bowls the walls of which are so thin that they are termed "egg-shell bowls", as well as deep bowls with flaring walls, tall beakers, various jars and curious forms, such as "tortoise vases" (lenticular vessels with high, cylindrical spouts) or "sauce-boats" (bowls with wing-like projection). Ubaid pottery is distinguished by its characteristic painted decoration of various geometrical patterns: triangles, rhomboids, zigzags, chequers and grids applied in darker paint onto lighter surfaces of vessels. In later phases of the Ubaid period (Ubaid 3–5), changes occurred that have been called an "evolution of simplicity", from a lavishly decorated style towards a simplicity of design. Also the surface covered with ornaments on individual vessels begins to shrink, while the decorated forms gradually give way to an undecorated variety. This increasing homogeneity and plainness are thought to have been brought about by the introduction of the tournette and by some social transformations.



Pottery from the Bahra 1 settlement falls into two categories; apart from Ubaid pottery, Coarse Red Ware (known also as Arabian Coarse Ware) is also represented at the site. The Ubaid pottery was imported from Mesopotamia, while the Coarse Red Ware was most probably locally manufactured in the Gulf region. Based on characteristic forms and decorative motifs, the pottery from the settlement can be dated to the Ubaid 2 and Ubaid 2/3 periods (that is to the last centuries of the 6th millennium BC).



*The Ubaid pottery found at the Bahra 1 site represents different categories of vessels, varying in form, function and technological details*

Pottery vessels served a wide range of functions; they were indispensable for cooking, eating and serving food, as well as in processing, storing and transporting all sorts of products. Apart from their practical uses, vessels may have played a symbolic role, becoming emblems of social status, manifestations of their owners' sex or profession. The vessels belong to the repertoire of a "material culture language", as means of communicating between individuals and groups. The characteristic ornaments or forms of the pots may have been "ID's" conveying their users' social, religious or tribal affiliations.

Most of the Ubaid pottery from the settlement can be considered luxury tableware, used for serving food. Of significance is the big number of bowls and plates. Cups and goblets, used for drinking, are also present, although less numerous. Less frequent are the so-called "closed" forms, such as jars and jugs.

The lavishly decorated plates and bowls may have been used by the settlement's inhabitants for serving food during festive gatherings or celebrations. During social acts of consumption (such as feasts, which played an important role in strengthening social ties) they may have been an essential element of display. As prestigious goods, the vessels may have also been important items in ceremonial gifts' exchange.





*Painted decoration is a hallmark of the Ubaid pottery*

Ubaid pottery has a decorated and a plain variety. Most of the vessels from Bahra 1 are painted and only a few examples carry incised or plastic decoration. In the painted ornaments geometrical motifs were used, such as triangles, ladders, wavy lines, hourglasses, zigzags and grids. These patterns were often set on the vessels in horizontal bands. Floral or zoomorphic patterns are a rarity. The paint – coloured from black, through different shades of brown to reddish, olive and purple-black – was set against a background of greenish, buff or pinkish surface of the vessels.

*Triangles are a popular motif in the decoration of Ubaid pottery from the Bahra 1 site*



Apart from luxury tableware, the Bahra 1 settlement has also yielded big Ubaid vessels (common and coarse ware), which were usually undecorated and meant for everyday use. Among this kind of pottery there was a squarish vat and some big jars, approx. 50 cm high, with long necks and rounded bodies. They may have been used for storage and processing of various products.



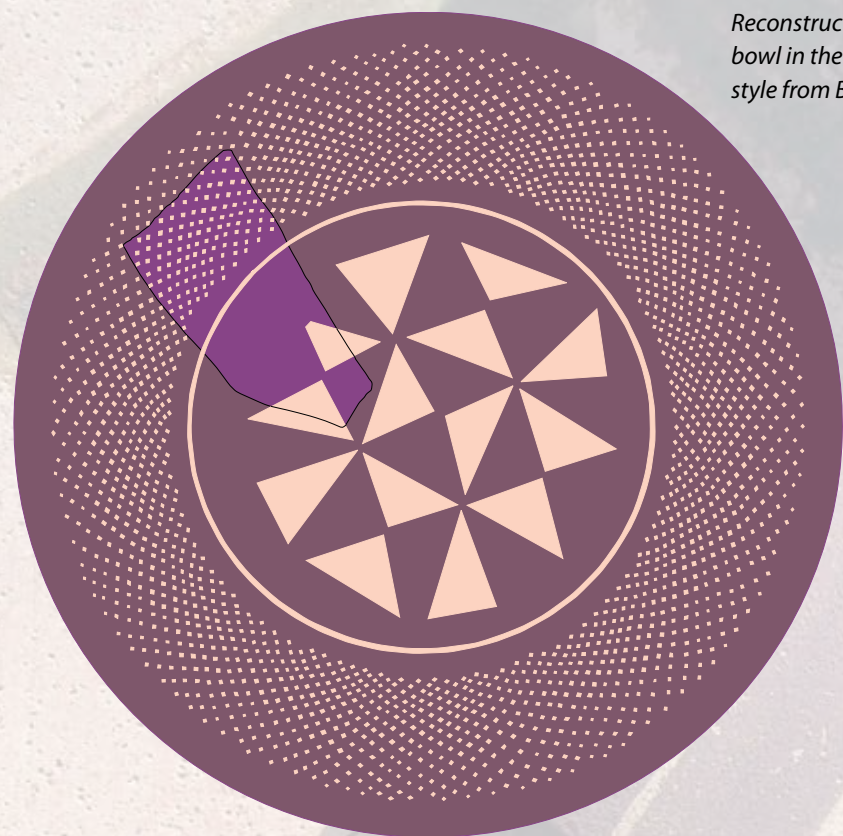
*The big jars were found in situ in one of the rooms of the excavated house*



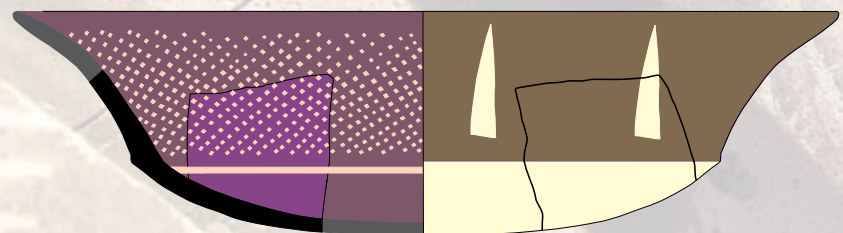
*The jars were in a very bad state of preservation, crushed into lots of tiny pieces and their partial reconstruction was possible only thanks to the careful handling of a professional restorer*







*Reconstructed carinated bowl in the Hajji Muhammad style from Bahra 1*



Carinated bowls with a characteristic, sharp bent of the vessels' walls are popular forms in the Ubaid pottery repertoire from Bahra 1. Many resemble vessels of the distinctive Hajji Muhammad style that can be found at such Mesopotamian sites as Hajji Muhammad, Eridu and Ras al-Amiya. This style is characterized by a reserve decoration; this means that almost the whole surface of the vessel is covered in paint, apart from the actual pattern which is left unpainted. Carinated bowls from the Bahra 1 settlement were richly decorated on the inside, usually with various compositions of triangles adorning the bowls' bottoms. The triangles are accompanied by the pattern of a dense, slanting grid, which leaves a delicate pattern of reserve squares on the inside of the bowls' walls. A more modest decoration was applied to the less visible, external surface of the bowls, although patterns, such as reserve triangles, appear on some of the vessels.

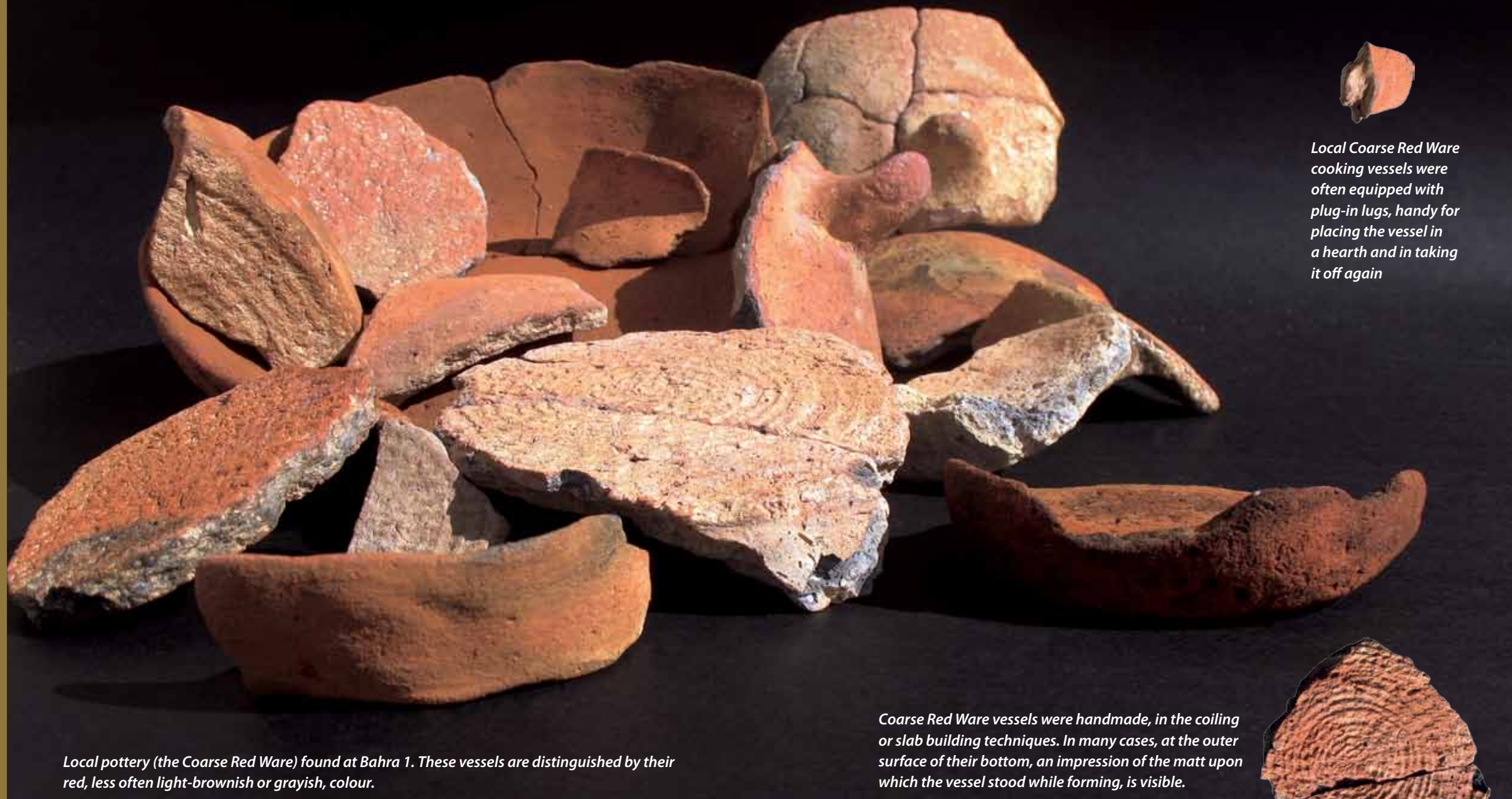


Among the Ubaid pottery from the settlement there are some outstanding forms, such as this oval vessel with a flat base, resembling the boat-type pottery. Its decoration in reserve consisted of bands with zigzags and "date-pit" patterns (the characteristic motif resembles date pits, which in fact have been found, for example, in Ubaid-period layers at Eridu). Apart from the paint, also an unusual technique of incises in reserve (sgraffito) was used to adorn the vessel with zigzags; this pattern was obtained by removing a layer of dark paint to reveal the light surface of the body. Zigzags in reserve are characteristic of the Hajji Muhammad style.



*The imported Ubaid vessels were valuable, so if they broke, they were meticulously repaired. Holes were drilled in the potsherds and threaded with a piece of string or fiber to join the broken pieces.*





*Local Coarse Red Ware cooking vessels were often equipped with plug-in lugs, handy for placing the vessel in a hearth and in taking it off again*

*Local pottery (the Coarse Red Ware) found at Bahra 1. These vessels are distinguished by their red, less often light-brownish or grayish, colour.*

*Coarse Red Ware vessels were handmade, in the coiling or slab building techniques. In many cases, at the outer surface of their bottom, an impression of the matt upon which the vessel stood while forming, is visible.*

At the Bahra 1 site, "local" Coarse Red Ware makes for approx. 40% of the collected pottery. The "local" vessels are found along Ubaid pottery at many sites in the Gulf, mainly in its central region. At some of these sites, Coarse Red Ware amounts for up to 60-70% of the pottery. The clay used for the ceramic paste of the vessels was tempered with chaff, sand and other inclusions. The vessels were fired at low temperatures, probably in bonfires. This resulted in a grey core, visible in the sherds' breaks and made the ware soft and brittle. Forms characteristic for Bahra 1 settlement are shallow bowls, high, straight-walled goblets as well as pots with lug handles. The Coarse Red Ware served practical ends – the lugged pots were used for cooking and the goblets and cups – as drinking vessels. In the case of the Coarse Red Ware, we are not dealing with any kind of standardized or centralized production. Many of the "local" wares could have been domestic products manufactured at and for individual households.

Ceramic vessels are an important source of information on the lives of ancient societies. They are used for dating, reconstructing trade relations and many other economical or social factors. Changes in the form of vessels or in their decoration are useful for establishing chronology, foremost of prehistorical periods. Vessels were often transported at long distances, as objects of trade or exchange, or as containers for other traded goods. This is why pottery is such a great tool for reconstructing ancient trade routes and tracing cultural and economical relations between various societies. A great example is the pottery from the Bahra 1 site, as it was an important element of exchange between the peoples inhabiting the Gulf region and their Mesopotamian neighbours in the 6th and 5th millennia BC.