

Variation in Late Iron Age Ceramic Assemblages in Southern Jordan: 'Edomite' Pottery Reconsidered

Archaeologists have generally approached the Iron Age — or 'Edomite' — pottery in southern Jordan from a broad, regional perspective of analysis. This has led it to be viewed as a homogenous, monolithic culture block that correlates with an equally monolithic ethnic group, the 'Edomites'. This paper addresses the fact that the concentration on the superficial unity of this pottery, as well as the focus on ethnic groups such as the 'Edomites', has resulted in distracting scholarly attention from the existence of significant variation and complex patterning in the way this pottery was employed. In particular, attention is drawn to the significance of such variation in terms of the social role of pottery in Iron Age society, an area, which until now has been little explored.

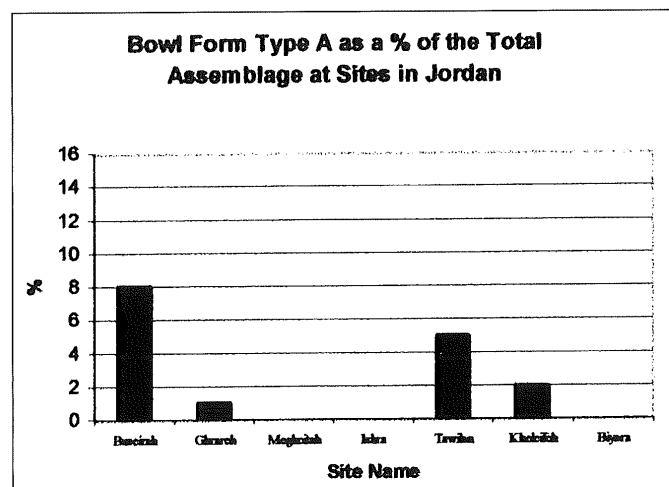
To do this, the Iron Age ceramic assemblages at a number of sites in southern Jordan were compared (Whiting 2002). These include Buṣayra, Ṭuwaylān (Ṭawilān), Umm al-Biyāra, Tall al-Khalifa, Ghrāra (Ghurāra), Khirbat 'Ishra, and Khirbat al-Megheitah. The analysis was based on the number of examples of all the main vessel forms represented in each assemblage as defined by Oakeshott's (1978) classification of Iron Age pottery from southern Jordan. To take into account the difference in size of the various assemblages, the proportion that each vessel type made up within each separate assemblage was compared.

The late Iron Age pottery of southern Jordan has a very distinctive style and is characterised by a high proportion of painted decoration. This decoration is most commonly in the form of black and sometimes coloured bands, and occasionally includes geometric designs (Hart 1995: 54). In addition, some vessels are decorated with denticulation. The undecorated pottery is characterised by large storage jars with 'triple-ridged' rims, shallow plat-

ters, small carinated bowls with out-turned rims, and cooking vessels with grooved rims (Hart 1995: 54). 'Edomite' pottery is generally dated to the seventh and sixth centuries BC (Bienkowski 1992a: 6).

While it is not possible to show the results of the study as a whole, a number of graphs of key vessel forms and their distributions are presented here, which very clearly demonstrate the great variety in vessel type distribution in southern Jordan (FIGS. 1-14).

FIGS. 1 and 2 shows the relative proportions of Bowl Types A and B — two very common Iron Age bowl forms in Southern Jordan — at the 7 main sites excavated in southern Jordan. The graphs show that these bowls form a large part of the assemblage at Buṣayra, but that they are less common at smaller sites such as Ghrāra and Ṭuwaylān. FIGS. 3 and 4 shows the proportional occurrence of two other key bowl forms — Bowl Type D and J — which are much more common at smaller sites such as Khirbat al-Megheitah and Khirbat 'Ishra than they are

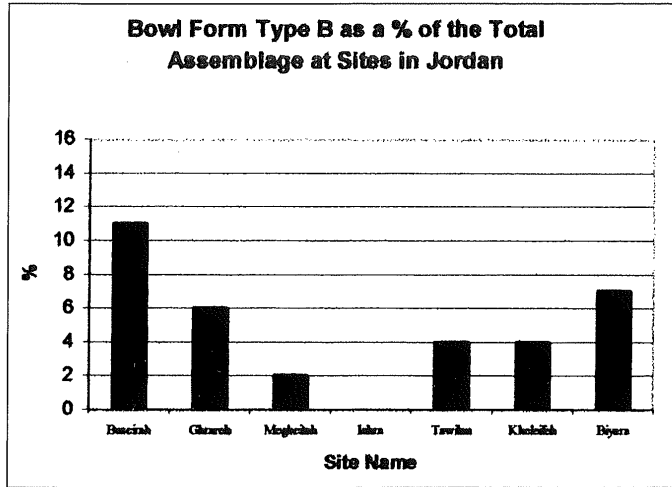


1. Bowl Form Type A as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.

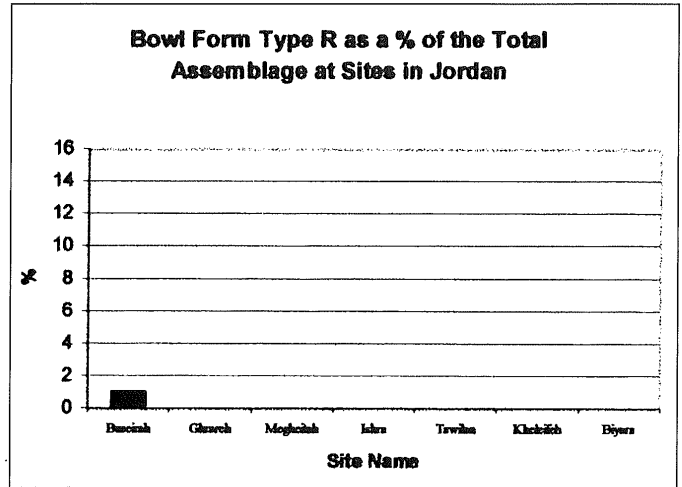
at larger sites such as Buşayra and Tuwaylān. Other bowl forms, such as Bowl Type R and Double Bowls, only occur at the site of Buşayra, as shown

by the graphs in FIGS. 5 and 6.

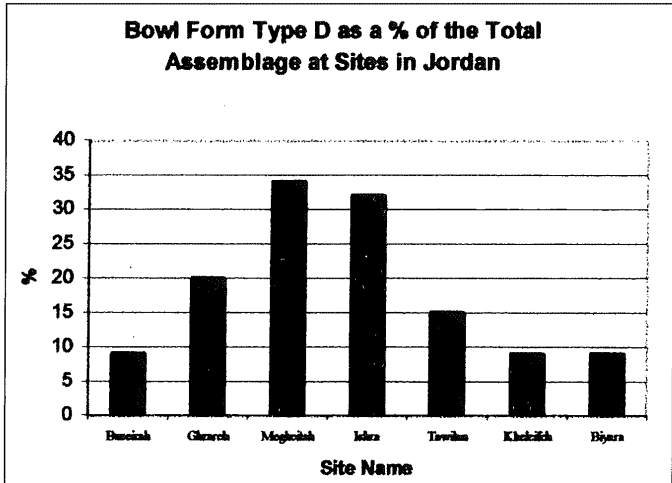
Turning now to jug forms, FIGS. 7 and 8 demonstrate that certain types are very common at Tall al-



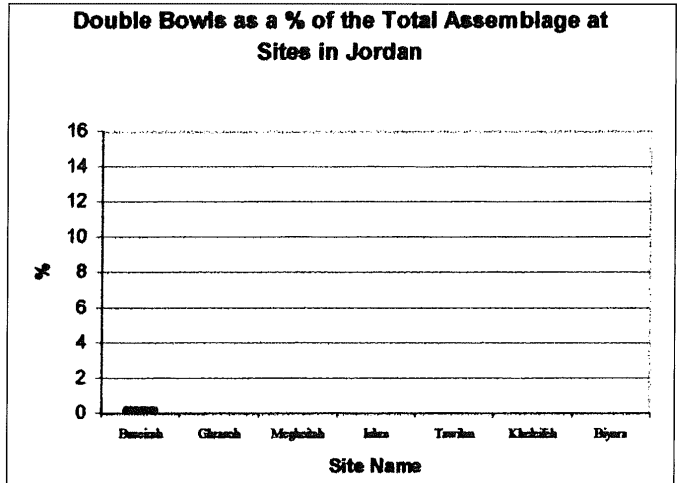
2. Bowl Form Type B as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



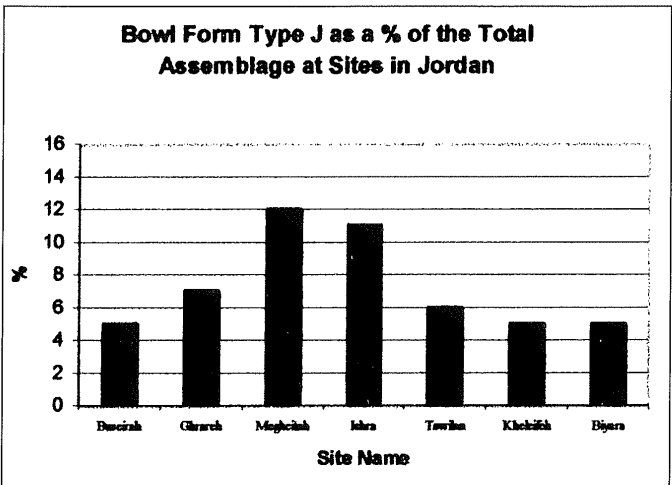
5. Bowl Form Type R as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



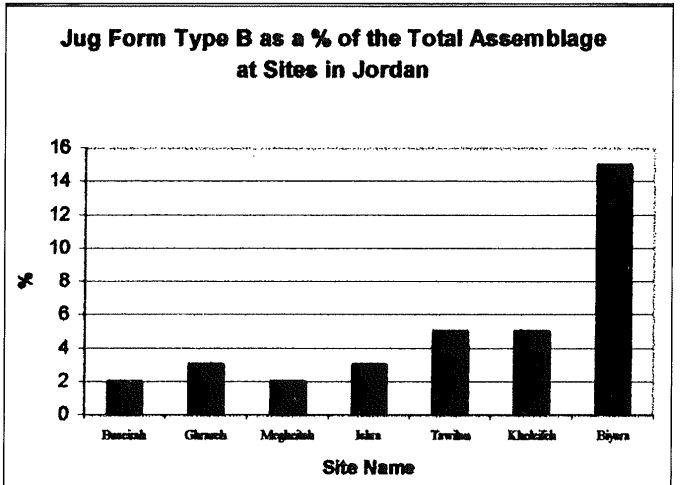
3. Bowl Form Type D as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



6. Double Bowls as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.

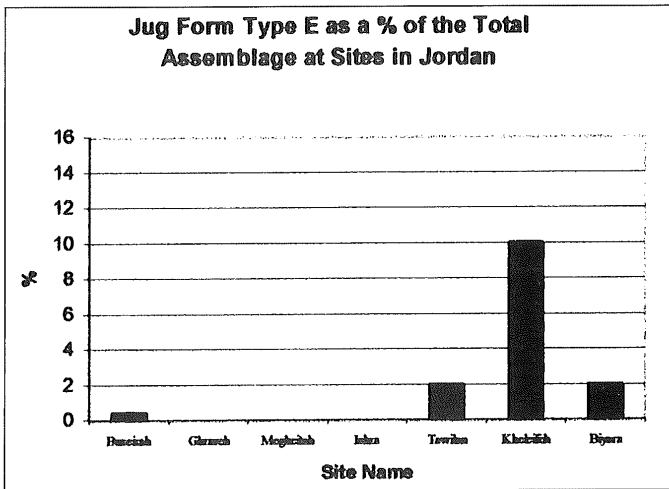


4. Bowl Form Type J as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.

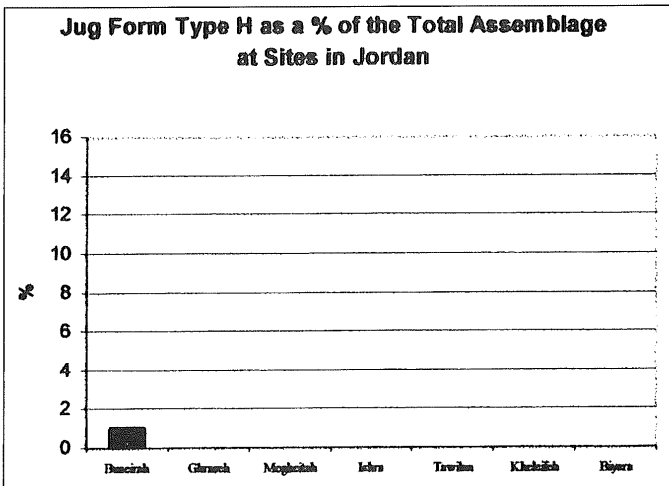


7. Jug Form Type B as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.

Khalifa, whereas others occur in a high proportion only at Umm al-Biyāra, while others occur only at Buşayra and nowhere else (FIG. 9). Cooking pot



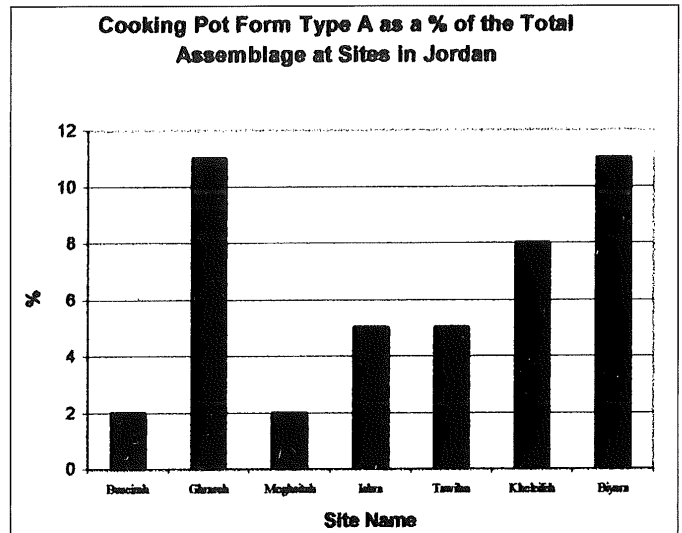
8. Jug Form Type E as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



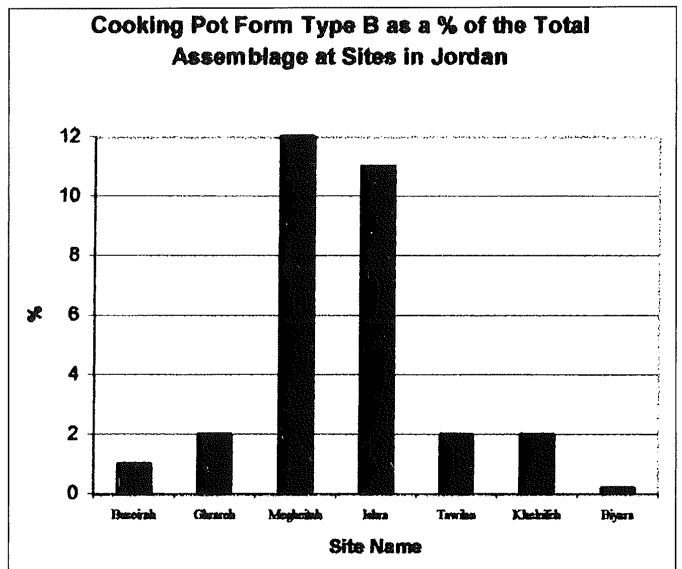
9. Jug Form Type H as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.

forms also occur in very distinct distributions as shown in FIGS. 10 and 11. Cooking Pot Type A forms the highest proportions at Ghrārah and Umm al-Biyāra, while Type B occurs more commonly at Khirbat al-Megheithah and Khirbat 'Ishra. Cooking Pot Types C and D occur only at Buşayra and in very small proportions at only three other sites: Tall al-Khalifa, Ghrārah, and Tuwaylān (FIGS. 12 and 13). In addition to vessel form, it is significant that the proportions of painted and denticulated pottery vary by site, as shown in FIG. 14.

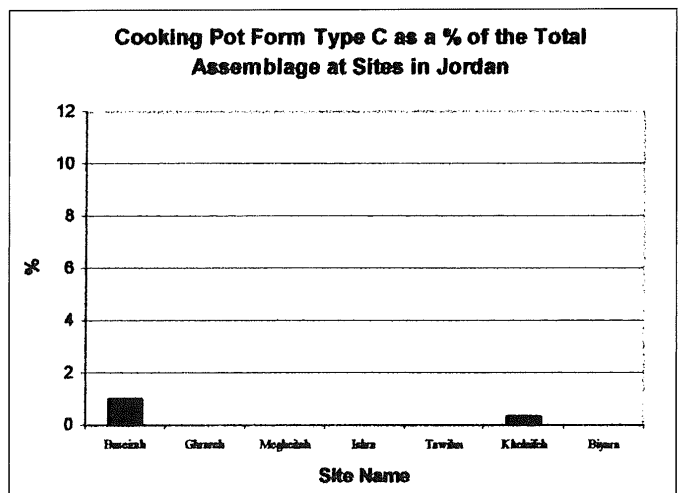
As well as the main sites discussed above, a number of so-called 'mountain-top' sites dated to the Iron Age have also been surveyed (Zeitler 1992; Lindner *et al.* 1996a; Lindner *et al.* 1996b). All of



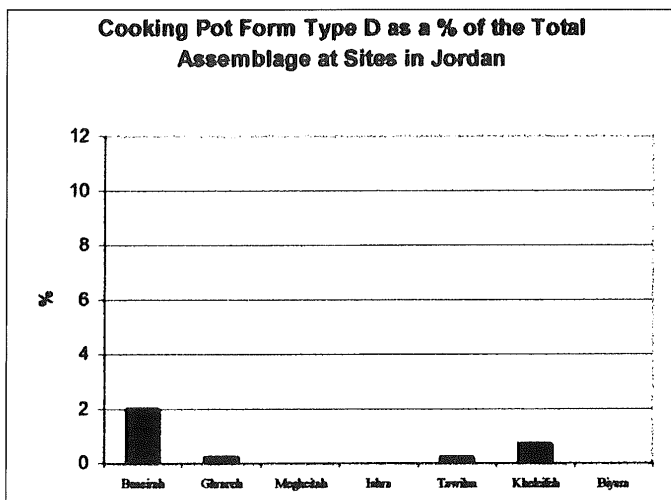
10. Cooking Pot Form Type A as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



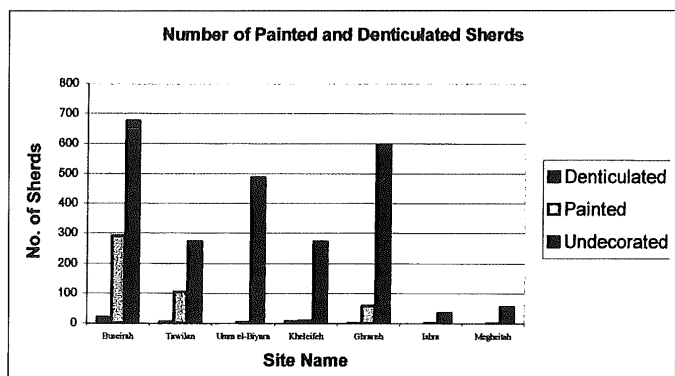
11. Cooking Pot Form Type B as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



12. Cooking Pot Form Type C as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



13. Cooking Pot Form Type D as a % of the total assemblage at sites in southern Jordan.



14. Number of painted, denticulated, and undecorated sherds at sites in southern Jordan.

these sites produced a very limited range of pottery types and only coarse wares were found (Whiting 2002: 220). None of the finer wares that are found at Buşayra and Tuwaylān, for example, were found at these sites, and decorated pottery was extremely rare. This phenomenon has already been noted by a number of scholars (Zeitler 1992; Lindner *et al.* 1996a; Lindner *et al.* 1996b), but its significance has been little explored.

As the largest site, and because Oakeshott's classification was largely based on the Buşayra ceramics, it is to be expected that all the pottery types in the formal classification of south Jordanian Iron Age II ceramics are represented to some degree at Buşayra. This is, however, clearly not the case at all the other excavated and surveyed Iron Age sites in southern Jordan. Due to their small size, for example, Khirbat al Megheithah and Khirbat 'Ishra produced the least amount of types – and regarding cooking pot and jug forms, the most types are represented at Tall al-Khalifa (Whiting 2002: 221). However, when considering jar forms, after

Buşayra, the most types are represented at Umm al-Biyāra (Whiting 2002: 221).

In addition to variation in vessel type, some broad vessel forms predominate at some sites and not others. Bowls, for example, clearly predominate at Buşayra in comparison to the other sites, and jugs and jars clearly predominate at Umm al-Biyāra (Whiting 2002: 221). For smaller sites such as Khirbat 'Ishra, Khirbat al-Megheithah, ash-Shurabāt, and the mountain-top sites, coarse wares predominate and very little painted ware is found (Whiting 2002: 221).

This discussion has provided a basic presentation of what is a fairly large and complex body of data. Despite this, the information presented shows very clearly that there is immense diversity in late Iron Age ceramic distribution patterns in southern Jordan, and that it is much more complex than has been previously assumed. Despite the recent work of Bienkowski and van der Steen (2001), which has highlighted the regional variation of south Jordanian Iron Age ceramics, most studies still focus on the degree to which cultural traits are shared in these assemblages. This has had the effect of creating a number of 'diagnostic' types which uphold the ideal of a univariate block of culture-historical archaeology with which to equate ethnic groups, in this case the 'Edomites'. However, the comparison of site assemblages in southern Jordan clearly reveals substantial material culture variation. Current archaeological practices and interpretative models applied to the archaeology of southern Jordan thus clearly mask this variation and disregard the possibility of local and temporal variations in the meaning and active, contextual usage of material culture.

Having said this, as all of the relative quantities of these pottery types at each site are based on the quantification of non-representative assemblages that most likely constituted Bennet's type series from her excavations (Bienkowski pers. comm.), the quantitative differences have to be taken with caution. In addition, the variation in distribution may also be chronological. However, the fact that a number of smaller, potentially single-phase sites such as Umm al-Biyāra and Tall al-Khalifa do not show a more limited range of for example jar and jug types, than much larger multi-phased sites such as Buşayra, indicates that variation in the range of vessel forms does not seem to be linked to chronology *per se*. On present evidence however, this issue

cannot be adequately explored, and it will require further examination when more detailed chronological information becomes available. In addition, site function may have influenced the composition of assemblages, but disregarding the obviously different function of Buşayra versus the other sites, many of the other sites can be reasonably classed as small agricultural settlements. This highlights how the assemblages all differ notwithstanding their use at sites with potentially very similar functions.

In conclusion therefore, and despite these various issues, the straightforward presence/absence and proportional comparison of the various different types of vessels between sites is revealing. It shows us that the inhabitants of each site were selecting from the overall repertoire of available — or known — pottery types, and were not simply following a normative and rule-bound structure of life, as proposed by previous more culture-historically led interpretations of the late Iron Age pottery of southern Jordan.

By taking the site as a meaningful scale of study, it has been demonstrated that even when the same basic activities were undertaken — for example cooking, storage, eating, and preparing food — and the same basic equipment was used — such as cooking pots and storage jars — the actual ceramic types varied from site to site. Choice in cooking pot types, bowl forms, and jar types varied between sites where the same functional activities were pursued. While there are also significant similarities between the assemblages analysed in this study, the scale at which this study has been conducted has clearly demonstrated that choice in the use of equipment not structured by blind submission to normative rules, functional need, or typology.

The juxtaposition of site-specific variability with regional patterns has thus enabled the identification of hitherto unrecorded patterns of artefact variability that challenge the conventional view of the normative and rule-bound structure of the late Iron Age in the southern Levant. Rather than practising the same late Iron Age way of life from site to site, differentiated only by ethnicity, the data analysis presented in this study suggests that these people participated differentially in culture. It is not sufficient to class these findings as the idiosyncratic vagaries of individuals however. Rather, it is important to recognise these patterns of variability as traces of individual agents interacting with each other through and during their everyday material

activities, such as the preparation and consumption of food.

The variation revealed by this study therefore suggests that, inasmuch as pottery is indicative of social practices, particular styles of pottery were integrated within local Iron Age social practices in a variety of ways, with sites and their inhabitants participating differently in the available material culture. This implies that we must think in terms not of a homogenous Iron Age ‘culture’ but of an Iron Age world that encompassed the coexistence of diverse communities and lifestyles, from the standpoint of which particular types of pottery could be drawn upon to greater or lesser degrees.

These communities may have been part of various overarching entities — as hinted at by the Nabonidus and Mesha’ stela for example — but since there is not necessarily a direct relationship between material culture and ethnic and political institutions, using artefact variation as a simple indicator of wider political situations is questionable. Rather what we should envisage is a dynamically linked region populated by diverse communities all living within their own specific material and social conditions, perhaps under overarching entities of some form, but not ones that necessarily directly influenced the social practices at each site. The availability and use of material culture would therefore not necessarily have been governed by strict adherence to ‘national or ethnic characteristics’ or the presence of ‘national borders’. Rather, contact between these different groups of people would have allowed contact with other lifeways, thus making ideas, objects, and practices available for appropriation.

Acknowledgements

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