

NINEVEH THE GREAT CITY

Symbol of Beauty and Power

edited by
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Detail of a relief showing King Ashurbanipal on a horse.
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21. The Ninevite 5 Culture at Nineveh

Elena Rova

The sequence of occupational levels discovered in Max Mallowan's 1931-32 'Prehistoric Pit' (figs. 20.2 and 21.1; Mallowan 1933) in the Istar Temple area on top of the Kuyunjik mound at Nineveh provided the backbone for the ceramic-based periodization of the pre- and protohistorical cultures of Upper Mesopotamia, which we still use today (see Gut 1995). The Ninevite 5 culture, which flourished in Northern Iraq and in the Khabur region of North-eastern Syria between the end of the Uruk and the late Early Dynastic period (c. 3100/3000-2600/2550 BC)⁴⁴ is named after the fifth level of Mallowan's deep sounding, where it was first defined (fig. 21.1).

Ninevite 5 is one of the regional cultures, mainly defined through their distinct pottery productions, which follow the end of the Late Uruk 'internationalism' in the area of Mesopotamia and the immediate surrounding regions. It developed, presumably in the Upper Tigris area of Northern Iraq, from a local 'Terminal Uruk' horizon through a 'Transitional' stage, which runs roughly parallel to the Jemdet Nasr period in Central and Southern Mesopotamia. Different styles of pottery decoration (both painted and incised/excised), which occur on a number of characteristic shapes (carinated jars, bowls and stemmed 'chalices') probably used for the consumption of food and beverages, represent its most distinctive feature (figs. 21.2-5). Painted pottery – associated with fine grey ware and, later, joined by Early Incised pottery – characterizes the earlier phase of the culture. It went out of use in the later phase, which is characterized by Incised and Excised pottery. Other categories of artefacts are not equally distinctive; glyptic art, for instance, is mainly represented by styles (e.g., the so-called Glazed Steatite/Piedmont style) that originated outside of the Ninevite 5 area, in Central Mesopotamia and Western Iran.

Compared to the preceding Uruk period, the Ninevite 5 period exhibits hardly any element of a complex urban society: occupation apparently consisted of a network of small rural settlements, rather evenly distributed across the territory, with a few larger towns, not exceeding 10-15 ha in size, located in between; public architecture is limited to small temples or shrines and grain-storage facilities, and burial goods are generally rather modest, with only a few better-equipped graves. Only in the final (Late Excised) phase of the culture (c. 2600 BC) does a new wave of urbanization appear to start, at least in the Khabur region of North-eastern Syria; for example, at Tell Leilan, Tell Hamoukar and Tell Brak (Lebeau 2011, *passim*).

This reconstruction may be biased, however, due to the fact that excavations concentrated on rural areas⁴⁵ and levels dated to the earlier Ninevite 5 period were hardly investigated at larger sites. In fact, although excavated evidence for this period is on the whole

44 For general information about the Ninevite 5 culture, see Roaf & Killick 1987; Rova 1988; Roaf 2000; Rova & Weiss 2003; for North-eastern Syria, also Lebeau 2011; for Northern Iraq, Rova, in press.

45 This is the case, for instance, for the area located along the Tigris to the north of Nineveh excavated in the early 1980s in the framework of the Eski Mosul Salvage project.

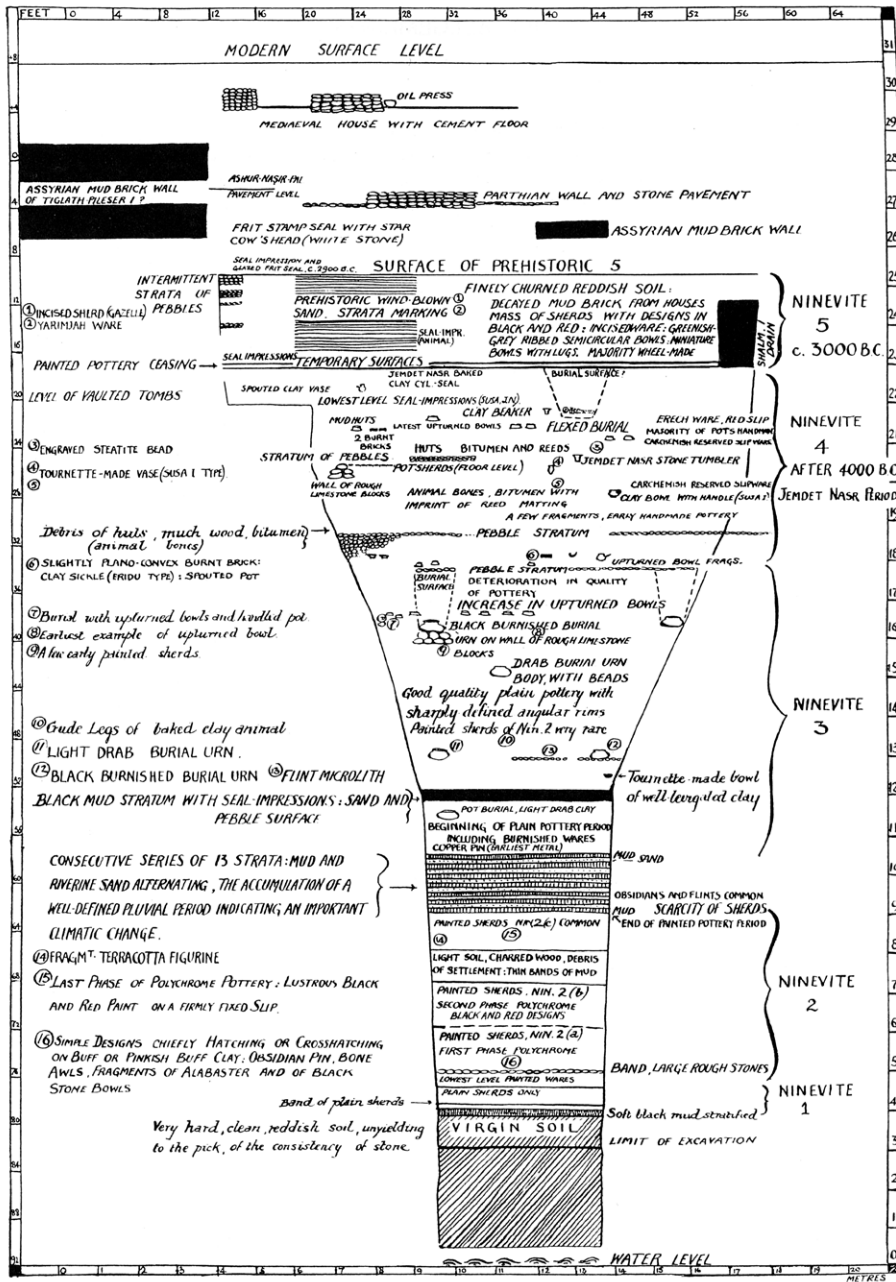


Figure 21.1 Schematic stratigraphic profile of the 'Prehistoric Pit'. Reproduced from Thompson & Mallowan 1933, Tf. 73.

rather meagre at the site due to the presence of massive later occupation, there is reason to assume that Nineveh may have been one of the largest, if not the largest, Ninevite 5 centre. David Stronach (1994, 92f.) argues that the entire Tell Kuyunjik (c. 40 ha) and possibly also part of the Lower Town (fig. 20.1) were settled at that time, and Julian Reade (2005, 354-5) suggests that a room measuring 24 m by 7.7 m with 4 m-thick mud brick arched walls with stone bases in the area of the Istar Temple (fig. 21.6), which was attributed by Thompson to Šamsi-Adad I, actually represents a Ninevite 5 'bent-axis' Istar shrine.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Renate Gut (1995, 40), however, considered it to be post-Ninevite in date (see also S. Renette, in press).

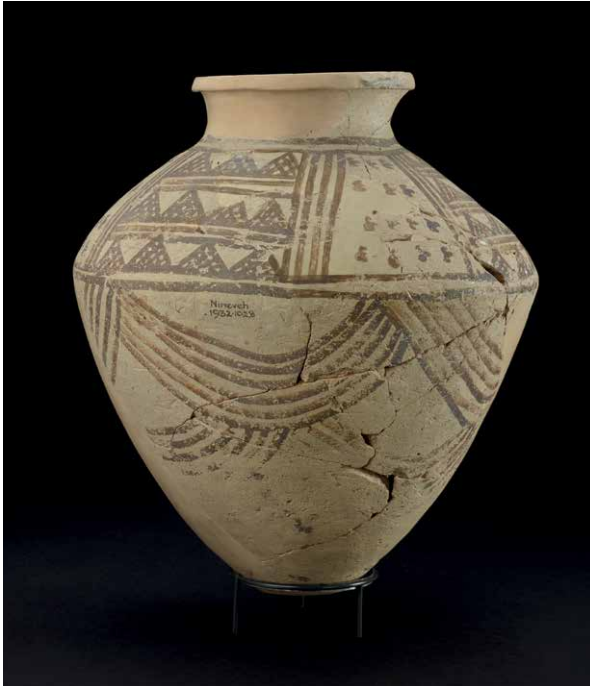


Figure 21.2 Painted pottery jar, Ninevite 5 period. Nineveh, Iraq; 3000-2500 BC; pottery; H 31 cm, D 26 cm; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (AN 1932.1028). © Ashmolean Museum.



Figure 21.3 Painted pottery jar, Ninevite 5 period. Nineveh, Iraq; 3000-2750 BC; pottery; H 11.4 cm; British Museum, London (1932,1210.121). © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 21.4 Incised pottery jar, Ninevite 5 period. Nineveh, Iraq; 2750-2550 BC; pottery; H 11.4 cm; British Museum, London (N.1590/BM 92828). © The Trustees of the British Museum.

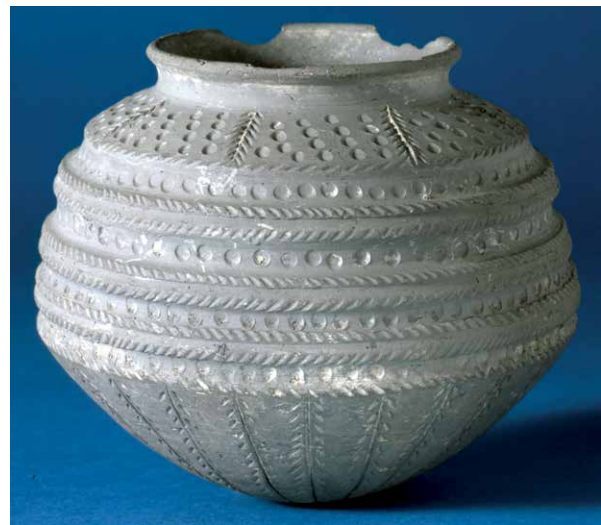


Figure 21.5 Incised pottery vessel, Ninevite 5 period. Nineveh, Iraq; 2750-2550 BC; pottery; H 10 cm, D 7.5 cm; British Museum, London (1932,1212.38). © The Trustees of the British Museum.



Figure 21.6 Possible Ninevite 5 shrine of Istar. Reproduced from Thompson & Hamilton 1932, Pl. XLVII.1.

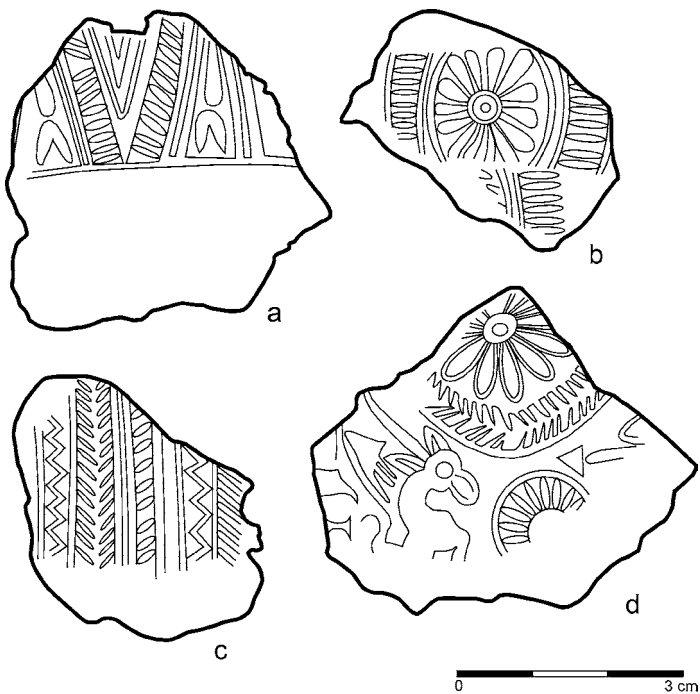


Figure 21.7 Examples of Ninevite 5 sealings from Nineveh. Adapted from Collon 2003, fig. 3, 1, fig. 4, 18, fig. 6, 49, fig. 8, 76.



Figure 21.8 Animal figurine found in Nineveh, Iraq; 3000-2500 BC; terracotta; H 4 cm, L 6.2 cm; Ashmolean Museum, Oxford (AN 1932.1105). © Ashmolean Museum.

Furthermore, early excavations at Nineveh produced more evidence for glyptic art than any other Ninevite 5 site, in form of c. 90 clay sealings and a dozen of original cylinder seals, although none of them has precise stratigraphic context, and they are therefore dated according to style (Collon 2003; Pittman, in press). The dominant style is the Glazed Steatite/Piedmont style, which is represented in its full variety of designs. Also well represented are related geometric styles, which find parallels in Central and Southern Mesopotamia and at Susa in a horizon which in general terms corresponds to the Early Dynastic I/II periods (fig. 21.7). The majority of the impressions are on container sealings (baskets, jars, bundles), but a few door sealings can also be identified: this suggests some sort of large-scale administrative use of seals at the site.

Early excavations reached Ninevite 5 deposits in several areas around the later Iṣtar Temple, but the results of these excavations were often left unpublished (Gut 2005; *cf.* also Renette, in press). The Ninevite 5 stratum appears to have been between 1.5 m and 4.5 m thick, but had been heavily damaged by later constructions, which had probably truncated its upper part, corresponding to the phase of Incised/Excised pottery. The area exposed in Mallowan's deep sounding measured approximately 12 m by 12 m;⁴⁷ its stratigraphy was reconstructed by Renate Gut (2005, 51 ff.) on the basis of absolute depths of finds in combination with excavation notes. To judge from the recovered ceramics, all the phases of the Ninevite 5 period are represented. The Ninevite 5 level consisted of a c. 2.5 m-sequence of relatively undisturbed layers (from -18 to -10 ft.; fig. 21.8), spanning the 'Transitional' and 'Painted/Early Incised' phases, followed by c. 3 m (from -10 to 0 ft.) of mixed deposits. Mud brick architecture was present, but it was fragmentary and difficult to interpret.

Recent, better stratigraphically controlled excavations in 1989-90 at the 'Kuyunjik Gully sounding' on the eastern side of the Kuyunjik mound (McMahon 1998) unfortunately unearthed Ninevite 5 material, mainly of the Painted/Incised phase, only on a very small and rather disturbed area.

47 Or, possibly, a maximum of 20 m x 15 m (Gut 1995, 51, fn. 74).