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2. Ubaid 'islands' in a non-Ubaid 'sea': an attempt to define the Ubaid and its cultural boundaries in northeastern Mesopotamia

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Abstract

The study of cultural boundaries demarcating similarities and differences between populations and ways of life in prehistoric times (i.e. before the appearance of writing) can be based only on the meticulous study and interpretation of 'silent material'. The term Ubaid is used to define a body of such 'silent material': a particular pottery type and the material culture associated with it, dating from the late seventh to the end of the fifth millennium BC. The Ubaid culture spread over a vast geographic area in southern and northern Mesopotamia, covering parts of today's western Iran, northern Syria and southeastern Turkey. Recently, two theories have been proposed to explain this phenomenon: first, that the Ubaid culture was adopted by the elites in these areas, as a means of forming a communal identity and consolidating their social status; second, that the expansion was related to a need to create an extensive trade network for the import of essential raw materials. Based on the juxtaposition of several kinds of 'silent material' that partake in the formulation of the cultural boundaries of the Ubaid (burials, head-shaping practices, etc.), this chapter suggests that the expansion of the boundaries of Ubaid material culture should be connected to the growth and diffusion of a particular tribe or conglomeration of tribes, which gradually spread throughout the Near East during the sixth and fifth millennia, creating nuclei of settlements in various regions.

Özet

Prehistorik dönemlerdeki (yazının bulunmasından önceki dönemler) yaşam şekilleri ile nüfuslar arasındaki benzerlikleri ve farkları birbirlerinden ayıran kültürel sınırların araştırılması, sadece titiz bir çalışma ve 'suskun malzemelerin' yorumlamasına dayandırılabilir. Ubeyd terimi böyle bir 'suskun malzeme' grubunu tanımlamak için kullanılır: terim M.Ö. yedinci binyılın sonlarından beşinci binyıla kadar tarihlenen belirli bir çömlek tipi ve onunla ilişkili maddi kültürü temsil eder. Bu kültür, güney ve kuzey Mezopotamya'da, bugünkü İran'ının batısındaki, Suriye'nin kuzeyindeki ve Türkiye'nin güneydoğusunda ki bazı kısımları da kapsayacak şekilde geniş bir coğrafi alana yayılmıştır. Son zamanlarda bu fenomeni açıklamak için iki teori ileri sürülmüştür: birincisi, Ubeyd kültürü, ortak bir kimlik oluşturma ve sosyal statüleri güçlendirme aracı olarak bu bölgelerde yaşayan elitler tarafından benimsenmiştir; ikincisi, gerekli hammadde ithalatı için geniş bir ticaret ağı oluşturma ihtiyacından doğan bir genişleme olduğudur. Bu bölümde, Ubeyd kültürel sınırlarının formülasyonu için yanyana getirilmiş birkaç çeşit 'suskun malzeme'ye dayanarak (mezarlar, baş şekillendirme uygulamaları gibi), Ubeyd maddi kültür sınırlarının genişlemesinin belli bir kabilenin veya kabileler topluluğunun büyümesine ve dolayısıyla yayılmasına bağlı olduğu öne sürülmektedir. Bu kültür, altıncı ve beşinci bin yıllarda Yakın Doğu'nun çeşitli bölgelerinde yerleşim çekirdekleri oluşturarak yayılmıştır.

Introduction

In the later part of the fourth millennium writing first appeared in southern Mesopotamia and Egypt (Houston 2004). In the subsequent 'historic' periods the available texts give voice to the material remains and offer information about many aspects of public and private life. On the other hand, the reconstruction of life in 'prehistoric' times, during the period prior to the invention of writing, has to rely entirely on 'silent' material evidence and the meticulous study of stratigraphy in archaeological excavations. Such a reconstruction is of course artificial and is based mainly on the axiomatic assumption that a group of people, who spoke the same language and had the same ancestry, also had a common way of life and a shared material culture. For example, they must have shared the same taste for the shape and decoration of their pottery, for the size and type of their houses and adhered to the same religious rituals. Archaeologists then try to classify and categorise the available data (i.e. house plans and grave types, pottery, lithics and other small finds) and assign clusters of similar data to 'cultural

groups'. A cluster of similar 'cultural groups' of approximately the same chronological period can be attributed to the same 'culture' (Oates 2010). This term is nowadays out of favour, and it is usually replaced by more abstract terms such as 'cultural horizon', 'cultural zone', 'interaction sphere' or 'horizon style' (Stein, Özbal 2007; Stein 2010).

Such neutral terms are indeed useful, because they allow a greater flexibility with regards to the interpretation of the archaeological data. But, then again, if we draw lines on the map and assign boundaries to these 'cultural zones' (for the Late Chalcolithic, see, for example, Sagona, Zimansky 2009: fig. 5.1), then we end up with an entirely artificial and misleading picture: as if people who lived within huge geographic areas all shared the same culture and invisible borders separated them from the rest of the world. Such maps are based on frustratingly scarce evidence from a few isolated sites (for the Ubaid, see Carter, Philip 2010a: viii), and also fail to take into account the dynamic effects of migratory movements (more on that below; see, for example, Nissen 1988, 46). Despite its limitations, such an (over)simplified approach is necessary, because we simply have nothing other than the insufficient archaeological evidence available to us. Nevertheless, we should constantly bear in mind that such reconstructions, which are based solely on silent archaeological data, are nothing more than working hypotheses, which can neither be proven nor discarded because of the lack of hard evidence.

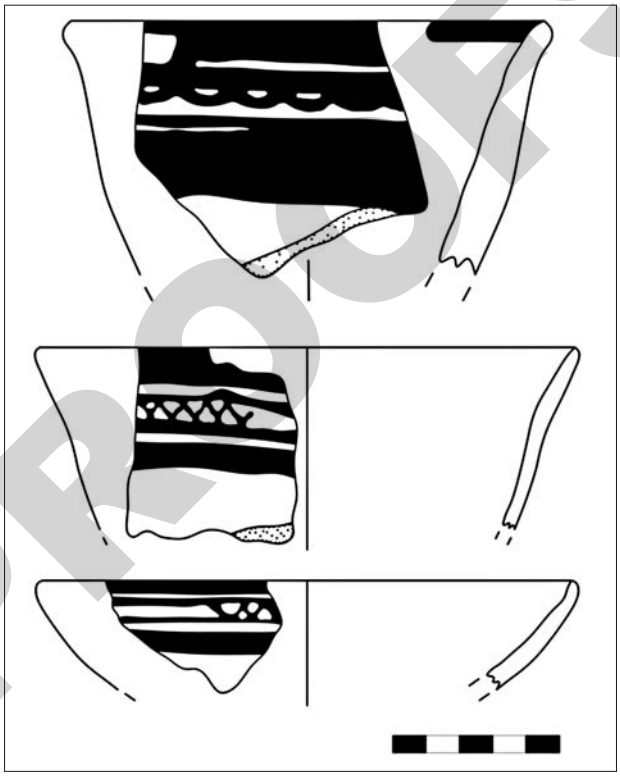

Fig. 2.1. Northern Ubaid pottery from Tell Nader (drawn by C. Beuger).

There are plenty of examples from historic periods that demonstrate the limitations of such approaches. A characteristic example is the migration of the Galatians to central Anatolia during the Hellenistic period, which is mentioned by various ancient authors. These Galatians, who shared a common ancestry and spoke a language different from any other in Anatolia, left almost no material evidence that differentiated them from their neighbours, and thus remain absolutely invisible from the archaeological point of view (for this instance and also the similar case of the Phrygians/Mushki, see Kopanias 2015). If we had at our disposal the data from the archaeological excavations only, we could never have guessed that a large ethnic group migrated to central Anatolia and lived there for such long period.

Several such 'cultural horizons' are thought to have existed during the Late Neolithic (ca 7000–5500 BC) and Chalcolithic (ca 5500–3100 BC) periods in Mesopotamia, most notably the Hassuna, Samarra, Halaf, Ubaid and Uruk. But, even in prehistoric Mesopotamia, life was most probably a lot more complex than our reconstructions. I will discuss here briefly the case of the Ubaid (ca 5500–4000 BC).

The Ubaid

The term 'Ubaid' is used to define a particular black-painted buff pottery (fig. 2.1), which was first discovered at the site of Tell al Ubaid in southern Mesopotamia (Hall, Woolley 1927), as well as the associated material culture and also the chronological period, which extends from the mid sixth to the end of the fifth millennium BC (Stein 2010: 23). Pottery of this style is found in stratigraphic layers mainly of the sixth and fifth millennia BC in many sites in southern and northern Mesopotamia, western Iran, northern Syria and southeastern Turkey.

The earliest occurrence of the Ubaid material culture took place in southern Mesopotamia in newly founded sites during the later part of the seventh millennium. In the case of Tell Awayli, the pottery in the oldest Ubaid layer seems to have been influenced by pottery of the Samarra culture from northern Mesopotamia (McIntosh 2005: 58), which could be understood as an indication that people from the north migrated south during the Samarra period (late seventh to early sixth millennium). Nevertheless, the other available evidence does not support this hypothesis (for more details, see Campbell, Fletcher 2010).

The Ubaid material culture spread gradually to the north only after the middle of the sixth millennium and replaced the Halaf culture (Roaf 1998: 53; also Akkermans 2000). Thus, in many older publications southern Mesopotamia is considered to be the core of the Ubaid culture, and its spread to the north is explained as the result of migration or even colonisation. It has even been

proposed that a similar process to the so-called Uruk expansion of the fourth millennium took place (Oates 2010). The city of Uruk is thought to have been the centre of an extensive trade network during the fourth millennium, which resulted in the spread of Uruk material culture across a vast geographic area, from southern Mesopotamia to northern Syria, southeastern Anatolia and southwestern Iran (Algaze 2004; 2012). But during the sixth and fifth millennia there was no urban centre in the Near East that could have played such a role; consequently, this model meets with little support nowadays (cf. Al Quntar et al. 2011).

More recent studies give emphasis to the regional diversity of the Ubaid material culture and prefer to explain the wide distribution of Ubaid culture via the model of 'hybridisation' (Carter, Philip 2010b: 7). It is suggested that there was no uniform Ubaid material culture, but that it gradually developed on a regional scale, as a result of the imitation of the technological achievements or some aspects of everyday life in neighbouring communities. The main argument against the association of Ubaid material culture to a particular people is its huge geographical distribution, from western Iran to southeastern Anatolia and the Mediterranean shores of Syria; it seems very improbable indeed that a single people would have been able to colonise such a vast area. No borders can be drawn around this area, however hard we try. An alternative interpretation will be presented in the following part of this chapter.

Tell Nader and other Ubaid sites

Since 2011, in an attempt to understand better the Ubaid in northeastern Mesopotamia, excavations have been conducted in Tell Nader in Erbil by the University of Athens (Kopanias et al. 2013; 2014; Kopanias, Fox forthcoming). The project aims to keep and record all finds, namely pottery and lithics, to study the archaeozoological and archaeobotanical remains and to analyse everything with the help of digital mapping software (GIS).

So far, several pyrotechnology-related clay constructions have been revealed which all belong to the same chronological horizon, namely the Late Ubaid (end of the fifth millennium BC). These consist of a two-chambered sun-dried clay construction with irregular walls (probably a kiln), a small clay oval-shaped oven and a circular clay oven; also present were a circular arrangement of pebbles and a concentration of large river stones. Furthermore, in the course of the 2013 excavation season a complex kiln was discovered, dating to the late fifth millennium; this was probably used not only for the production of pottery but also metal (fig. 2.2). Finally, under a concentration of small stones, two more circular clay kilns were discovered. The western one was damaged. In association with the

Fig. 2.2. Tell Nader: kiln for the production of pottery and possibly metal revealed during the 2013 excavation season (photo by K. Kopanias).

Fig. 2.3. Tell Nader: female burial revealed during the 2011 excavation season (photo by K. Kopanias).

Fig. 2.4. Tell Nader: three-dimensional reconstruction of the female burial (graphic by L. Kopanias).

eastern one there was an inhumation burial of an adult woman with her head oriented to the west. Her legs were flexed and her hands were positioned on her breast and belly, but, strangely, her body was in a prone position with her face facing into the ground (figs 2.3–2.4). The kiln was

too small for the body, so her feet stuck out. The impression given is that the female was placed inside the kiln without a great deal of care. Her prone position was, nonetheless, intentional. Several pieces of clay were found near her head, an indication that the soil was thrown very carelessly on the dead body. No funerary offerings were found inside the grave, with the exception of three dog teeth, all from different animals.

So far, the site has produced all the typical find categories expected in Ubaid sites: pottery, clay nails, labrets, animal figurines, slingshots and stone mace heads, among others. But, since all pottery sherds were collected and recorded, it has been possible to determine that Ubaid pottery constitutes just a fraction of the overall amount of undecorated pottery, approximately 20%.

So the question is, why do we have so much non-Ubaid pottery at a site that otherwise appears to conform to what we call Ubaid? A fact that needs to be taken into consideration is that the cultural affinity of Ubaid sites is not restricted to typical black-on-buff pottery, but includes also the following finds: tripartite buildings, niched-and-buttressed public buildings, communal cemeteries, clay 'ophidian figurines', clay nails (of unknown use), flanged clay disks (probably attached to garments as ornaments, as seen on figurines), conical pottery rings and horn-shaped small clay objects (Carter, Philip 2010b: 4). The dietary practices seem also to have been similar, as suggested by the available archaeobotanical evidence and also the fact that very similar vase types were in use at Ubaid sites (Pollock 2010). Beer production and consumption is also thought to be a recurring common trait (Joffe 1998).

Recent analysis has brought to light a new feature that can be added to this list: head-shaping. Head-shaping is a permanent form of body modification and was presumably initiated by the family of a child by applying bindings to the child's head in infancy. It is known in many different forms among various cultures around the world, at different times from prehistory to the present, and can indicate social status, gender, as well as tribal identity (Croucher 2010; Lorentz 2010). There are, to date, ten known Ubaid sites, or sites dating to around the time of the Ubaid, in present-day Turkey, Iran and Iraq with human remains demonstrating circumferential forms of head-shaping (fig. 2.5). The vast majority of these sites have been published (for further bibliography, see Carter, Philip 2010a), although the majority of sites from the Ubaid (about two-thirds of the total number of known sites) have not revealed human remains demonstrating head-shaping. This may be for a number of reasons, such as poor preservation and human remains not being recovered from excavation or not saved, if indeed head-

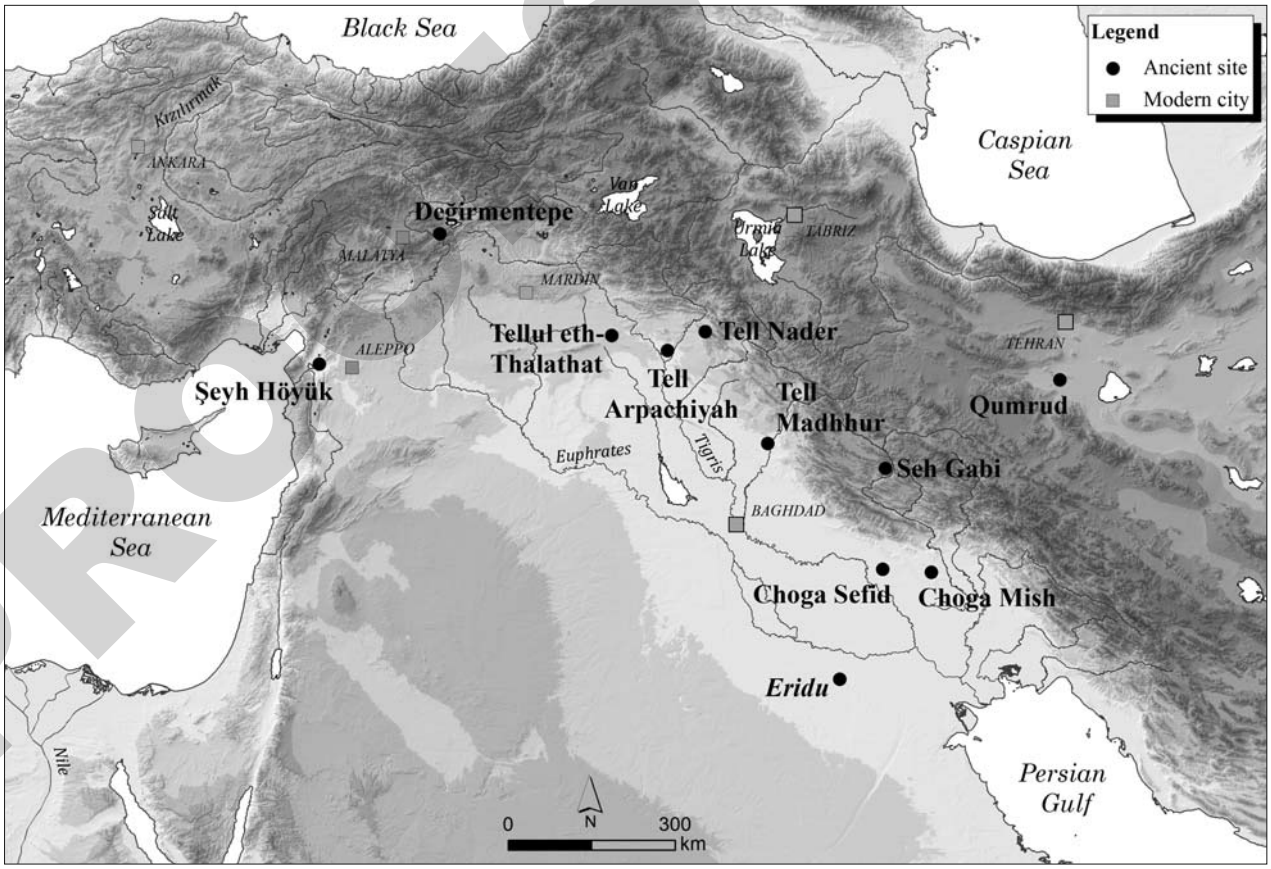

Fig. 2.5. Map of Ubaid sites with finds of circumferential head-shaping (map by K. Kopanias and M. Massa).

shaping was practised. Tell Nader must now be added to the growing list of Ubaid-period sites demonstrating a circumferential form of head-shaping, making a current total of 11 (fig. 2.6; Kopanias, Fox forthcoming).

It is evident, despite the various regional variations, that the inhabitants of the Ubaid settlements shared a more or less common way of life. We should not underestimate the fact that similarities in Ubaid material culture are not only evident in the public aspects of life (tripartite buildings, communal cemeteries) but also in private everyday life (dietary customs, as well as the use of clay nails, flanged disks, conical rings and horn-shaped objects). If we choose to reject the idea that the Ubaid culture was connected to a particular group of people, we need to suggest alternative reasons as to why different people chose to adopt this particular way of life, both in public and private terms. The main hypotheses can be summed up as follows: (1) the Ubaid culture was adopted by the elites, as a means of forming a communal identity and consolidating their social status, and, in essence, it was a means to control the territory around their respective localities; (2) Ubaid culture was spread because of the need to create an extensive trade network for the importation of required raw and exotic materials (Stein, Özbal 2007: 332).

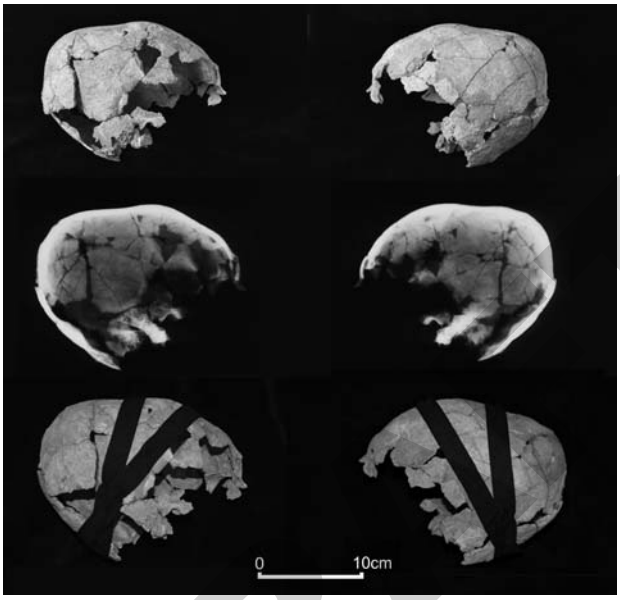

Fig. 2.6. Tell Nader: female skull with traces of head-shaping revealed during the 2011 excavation season (photo by S. Fox).

Ubaid elites?

The first of these hypotheses is rather problematic, since the elites of the fifth millennium remain elusive (Carter, Philip 2010b: 12–13). The size of an Ubaid house cannot be considered as an indication of the social status of its owner; it seems to me that it was mainly related to the number of family members to be accommodated. And we should not forget the fact that even the most elaborate tripartite buildings of the Ubaid still remain simple constructions. They were built mainly with mud and reeds, materials that were locally available and easy to acquire. The building of houses must have been a family affair, and professional assistance was probably more or less restricted (cf. Becker 2009).

Moreover, in the communal cemeteries there are no graves that can be considered as 'rich'. The graves were mostly simple pits opened in the earth and the offerings to the dead were restricted mainly to a few pottery vessels. Occasionally, simple ornaments, manufactured mainly from locally available materials, or clay figurines were offered (Frangipane 2007: 169). The absence of both grave architecture and offerings, which would indicate the higher social status of the owner, cannot be a coincidence and indicates the absence of an elite. In contrast, among the burials of the early Uruk period, in the early fourth millennium, are graves that can without any doubt be attributed to members of an elite (Carter, Philip 2010b, 13). A possible indication of the accumulation of wealth – and thus the emergence of an elite – is the use of seals; an item is sealed because it belongs to someone and is of value to them. But the use of seals during the Ubaid period is rather limited (Duistermaat 2010) and, in any case, there is no way to know in which cases the sealed items were considered to be public or private property.

There is, of course, also the possibility that there existed an elite that based its influence not on material wealth, but on personal skills (for example efficiency in war, ability to nurture many family members, etc.), the authority of an office held temporarily or permanently (for example religious authority, being the tribe or family elder, etc.) or simply an arbitrary hereditary right (Wiessner 2002). If such an elite did indeed exist during the Ubaid period, then it remains entirely invisible in the archaeological record.

If we assume that such an elite did in fact exist in the Ubaid (and ignore the fact that we would have then wandered into the sphere of unprovable hypotheses), what reason do we have to assume that its influence extended beyond a single settlement or even a small group of neighbouring communities? And how was it possible that the communal identity formed by members of a local elite in such a local settlement spread throughout such a vast geographic region? As already noted, in the Ubaid there was no significant urban centre with extensive political power and an elite capable of consolidating its power through the creation of a new social identity (cf. Wright 1994). And there is simply no evidence in the archaeological record that a common religion existed only in the Ubaid settlements and that some of the inhabitants would have been ready to propagate such a religion in other regions.

Such anachronistic models are far from probable for this early period. Even if an elite existed during the Ubaid, its influence was most probably limited within the borders of the small settlements of the time (cf. Frangipane 2007).

Ubaid trade networks?

The second hypothesis, that Ubaid culture was spread because of the need to create an extensive trade network for the importation of necessary raw and exotic materials, is also far from satisfactory. A trade network would only have been necessary if there was also an essential commodity that needed to be imported regularly. Those who refer to the existence of a complex long-distance trade network are in fact seeking to find something similar to the so-called Uruk World-System of the fourth millennium (for references, see Carter, Philip 2010b: 8–10). Trade in the fourth millennium seems to have become more important because of the wider use of metals. Metals were already produced during the fifth millennium, but in such small quantities that they actually seem to have played no important role in the economic and social life of the time. So, what might been an essential commodity during the Ubaid? For the excavated Ubaid sites there is, to date, no evidence of systematic accumulation of imported goods or finds that could be considered 'exotic'. There is only one exception to this rule: obsidian.

Obsidian was valued as a raw material because it was possible to produce from it very sharp and hard lithic tools of superb quality. It was most probably also valued as an 'exotic' commodity, because it was rare and its use restricted (Healey 2010: 183–86, pl. 13.1–4; 2011). If a long-range trade network did in fact exist in the Ubaid, then it is reasonable to assume that it was mainly concentrated in the trade of this particular material. But how was this long-range trade conducted? If merchants did indeed make the long journey from Mesopotamia to Anatolia in order to acquire obsidian, then we must assume that there were agreements with the inhabitants of the settlements en route, which made safe passage possible. One could even speculate that some Ubaid settlements controlled their own distant *emporia*, i.e. trade stations, or even colonies, comparable to the trade colonies of the Old Assyrian period in Anatolia (Aubet 2013). Nevertheless, if such an organised trade network did in fact exist, then it would have left visible traces in the archaeological record. In the case of metals, it is far more difficult to find evidence of trade, since useless metal objects were not discarded, but melted down and reused. In contrast, the reduction sequence (*chaîne opératoire*) for the production of obsidian leaves traces; in addition, damaged tools could seldom have been recycled and were simply discarded. If 'professional' traders were importing obsidian, either directly from the source or from intermediary settlements, then this material would not have been so scarce in the Ubaid sites, since it was clearly something that was in great demand. Nevertheless, there are no Ubaid settlements with such an abundance of this commodity that it could indicate the existence of an organised and reliable trade network. The number of obsidian finds from the excavated Mesopotamian sites shows that it remained rare (Healey 2010: 183, table 13.1). In the case of Tell Nader it was used for the production of less than 3% of the lithics, while locally available flint was used for the production of about 95% of the tools. A similar situation is observed in most Ubaid sites, where obsidian seems to have been used for the production of only 2–5% of tools (Healey 2010: 183–86). Even at sites that were situated nearer to the obsidian sources and could have served as gateway communities for the trade of obsidian (Hirth 1978), such as Tepe Gawra and Tell Brak, this material was relatively scarce (Healey 2010, 183–86).

Even if we assume that long-distance trade already took place in the sixth and fifth millennia, despite all the absence of evidence, we are then confronted with a very difficult question. What did the inhabitants of the Ubaid settlements actually have to offer in order to acquire the obsidian? The obsidian sources lie in southern (Göllüdağ) and southeastern Anatolia (Nemrut Dağ, Bingöl) (Carter in Kopanias et al. 2013: 33–36). If we assume that traders from Mesopotamia travelled all the way to the north in order to acquire it, what could they be carrying with them to use as exchange goods? Pottery and agricultural products are clearly not suitable for transport over such huge distances. Small Ubaid sites (such as Tell Nader), and even bigger sites (such as Tepe Gawra), had no access to valuable raw materials or anything that could be used to acquire exotic goods, other than agro-pastoral products.

Instead of imagining complex and anachronistic long-range trade networks, it is more probable that 'professional traders' did not conduct the trade in obsidian at all. An alternative model would be that the obsidian trade rested mainly in the hands of nomadic groups, which migrated regularly between southern and southeastern Anatolia and Mesopotamia, even as far as the Persian Gulf (for a full list of the available data, see Healey 2010: 183, table 13.1). In the case of the Pre-Pottery Neolithic site of Kömürcü-Kaletepe it seems that people from the Levant travelled there in order to extract the obsidian and manufacture their tools on site (Balkan-Atlı, Binder 2001). A similar case could be argued also for the Ubaid period. These nomadic people would carry rather small or medium quantities of obsidian and, on their way, would exchange it for agricultural products, as a supplement to their own diet. Agricultural products were one of the few things that the inhabitants of all settlements, even the smallest ones, could offer. But trade must have been rather irregular, which would explain

the fact that such a small amount of obsidian is found at the Ubaid sites. Their inhabitants were forced to rely mainly on the locally available flints for the production of their tools, despite the fact that they were of poorer quality.

An Ubaid People?

If we reject the idea that Ubaid culture was connected to a particular tribe, we have to find another explanation for the fact that people living across a vast area chose to adopt this particular way of life, both in public and in private. However, based on the available data mentioned above, the safest bet would actually be to associate Ubaid material culture with a particular tribe or conglomeration of tribes, which gradually spread throughout the Near East during the sixth and fifth millennia, and created nuclei of settlements in various regions, some of which grew and, after some time, reached a significant size. There was no 'political centre' controlling this migration – no 'core' or 'periphery' can be determined (Stein 2010: 23) – so the process was in no way similar to what we think happened during the Uruk period.

Evidence suggests that the need for long-distance trade did not play any significant role in the case of this particular migration. The case of the Ubaid sites in the Persian Gulf, in areas with scarce water and without any raw materials, clearly shows that the main reason for the establishment of new settlements was to find lands able to provide means for the sustenance of the migrating groups (Białowarczuk 2013). If we look for historic parallels, then the widespread and decentralised migration of the Aramaic people during the late second millennium BC comes to mind (Kirleis, Herles 2007). This model would explain the fact that local styles, such as the Halaf in northern Mesopotamia, overlap with and also influence Ubaid material culture to a great extent. The case of head-shaping sheds additional light on this question. As already noted, circumferential head-shaping was practised in many Ubaid settlements over an extensive area. It could have been important for baby girls to be head-shaped during the Ubaid period, for example, if the females married outside the group and moved to live with their husbands. They would literally carry their identity with them (Kopanias, Fox forthcoming).

This model could also explain the vast geographic distribution of Ubaid-related material, even as far as the southern Caucasus (for example Chataigner et al. 2010). On the other hand, the longevity of Ubaid culture, which seems to have lasted for more than two millennia, is hard to explain.

Concluding remarks

In the case of the Ubaid settlements it is clearly difficult to make definitive statements about the cultural boundaries or the 'ethnicity' of the people who lived in them. Pots do not speak, and the reluctance of recent scholarship to associate Ubaid pottery with a particular people is understandable. Nevertheless, there is substantial evidence beyond the pottery which suggests that people living in Ubaid sites had a very similar way of private and public life, and head-shaping is an important newly identified element that hints at the association of Ubaid material culture with a particular population group. It would be futile to try to connect the Ubaid population with any people known to us from historic periods. And it makes no sense to try to define an Ubaid 'ethnicity', particularly at a time when population mobility was not restricted by formal borders. Thus, our question about Ubaid cultural boundaries should be reconsidered by thinking beyond the traditional concept of the way in which cultural boundaries develop geographically as a single area. If the reconstruction detailed above is correct, then it would be more accurate to speak of Ubaid 'islands' in a 'sea' of non-Ubaid settlements.

These Ubaid 'islands' just happened to be visible in the archaeological record and thus became a focus of scholarly research. In order to understand the Ubaid better, it is essential to learn more about non-Ubaid pottery and also contemporary non-Ubaid settlements. The case of Ubaid culture shows that it is difficult to draw borders, even cultural ones, in Mesopotamia during the sixth and fifth millennia BC.

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