

Group Perception and Identity Markers in the Neolithic Communities of Western Asia

The Case of Husking Trays in 7th Millennium Upper Mesopotamia

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Introduction

Communities are composed of people united by common interests. The German word, as often happens and as my permanence at Freie Universität has taught me so well, best expresses this idea: *Gemeinschaft* is in fact a relationship in which individuals are oriented to a larger association, as much if not more than to their own self-interest (Salisbury 2012). People in a *Gemeinschaft* have common beliefs and behaviours, they do more than simply coexist. The ideas that people hold about aesthetics, hospitality, ideology and about behaviour combine to form a structure that is their community (Whittle 2005, 64). The term *Gemeinschaft* is a perfect one that links different definitions given to the community: as a form of group cohesion, as unity and action aimed at common interests or underlying a shared way of doing things “right”, and as a geographic area with spatial and chronological limits, or a socio-geographic structure merging the two (Hollingshead 1948; Yaeger and Canuto 2000, 5).

Salisbury has distinguished three broad “*themes of community: a community of place, a community of identity, and a community of networks*” which are all interrelated and differently identifiable in the archaeological data (Salisbury 2012, 205).

People who live close to each other are more likely to share a sense of place and collaborate to its construction. This shared sense is what makes a place become culturally constructed.

The second sense is the community of identity, located primarily in the mind, as a “sense of community”. Identity is an important part of moral and imagined communities and forms the basis for collective action. Identity, as community, is formed through human interaction, practice and interpretation (Knapp 2003). Through identity we perceive ourselves, and others see us, as belonging to certain groups and not others, and being part of a group entails active engagement and continuous confirmation and reinforcement of those relations. Identity and community therefore are not a static thing but a continual process (Díaz-Andreu et al. 2005), and they are both constructed, acquired and maintained through interaction between people.

Making a major turn from a narrative account of the succession of cultures based on typological classifications of material culture, in the last twenty years works on the Pre-pottery Neolithic of Western Asia have been mainly oriented to the understanding of the dynamics of social organization of the first sedentary communities and it is interaction that has been the keyword guiding scholars in the interpretation of the structure of these communities. Indeed, the explosion of ritual and symbolic expressions, which constitutes the most impressive character of the Pre-pottery Neolithic, has been read as a mean for increasing spheres of interaction.

It has been abundantly shown that Pre-pottery Neolithic B groups in particular were characterised by a complex range of

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overlapping levels of simultaneous social interaction, including the household, kinship, community, regional groups being the most evident (Kuijt 2000; Watkins 2008; Borrell and Molist 2014). Watkins suggests that Prepottery Neolithic communities are “*local and regional peer polity interaction spheres*” and that “*in subtle and complex ways, people were formulating and expressing multi-layered identities*”, “*they were using, for the first time, sophisticated, symbolic means of articulating their multi-layered identities – as family or household, as lineages, as communities, as members of local clusters of villages, as participants in regional and supra-regional networks*” (Watkins 2008, 165).

During the Pottery Neolithic period expressions of identity are no longer monumental, but they still pervade the material life of communities and may be identified in the highly symbolically charged material culture that continues to characterise this period (Balossi Restelli 2017; Cruells et al. 2017; Nieuwenhuys 2008).

Building identity through materiality

People interact through practices and with their material worlds, with objects that are made, modified and given specific meaning by each group and community (Miller 2005; Pollock 2015a). In modern or contemporary world, dress and ornamentation, but also architecture, are some of the media through which relationships and interaction are negotiated, and archaeologists too use such material elements to evaluate the social articulation of groups (Pollock 2015a). Material culture is thus an active instrument in creating social relationships, but it is not a simple equation the one we may use to define objects as indicators of interaction since “*the extent to which cultural similarity relates to interaction, depends on the strategies and intentions of the interacting groups and how they use, manipulate and negotiate material symbols as part of those strategies*” (Hodder 1982, 185). Recent works on Neolithic communities of Western Asia have suggested

that the long-distance exchange of obsidian is possibly one way to regulate and maintain complex interactions aimed at reducing risks of isolation linked to the diminished mobility of those communities (Ibáñez et al. 2015). Obsidian exchange thus would be a strategy thanks to which large networks could be built and maintained. It is thus not only the economic and technological value of obsidian to determine its need and circulation over large distances, but also its potential to construct large networks of social relations between communities. Ibáñez further suggests that this exchange might have been regulated through common actions and practices. Even though the latter are difficult to be identified for the moment, the greater dynamism in relations between Neolithic communities is evident and visible in the sharing of objects. This implies sharing of technologies and knowledge and was probably one of the keys to limit the risk of involution during the construction of a Neolithic life (Ibáñez et al. 2015).

These networks of interaction between people and communities are based on the construction of common identities, which at the smaller scale are certainly built also on the idea of a common or shared origin, history or ancestry; this is also the reason for which many material and symbolic resources required to sustain the narration of this past are vastly shared (Hall 1996): the skull treatment common amongst the Levantine communities, the stone stelae in south-eastern Anatolia and the decorated stone pestles in the more northeastern Tigris region during the 10th–8th millennia BCE (Çelik 2015; Karul 2011).

Neolithic interaction

Such wide networks of interaction characterise Pre-pottery Neolithic communities in Western Asia and are most astonishing due to the revolutionary impact of this new wide system of social, economic and ideological interactions. The same system continues in later phases of the Neolithic too. The

multi-layered structure of overlapping networks of varying scales that incorporates vast territories, characteristic of Late Neolithic Halaf 6th millennium communities has been vastly debated (Frangipane 2013; Fletcher 2016; Nieuwenhuys 2016). Collective storages, shared architectural plans, pottery styles, and symbolic elements are the most evident material expressions of the varying layers of interaction, and their vast distribution has been interpreted as an indication that these relations were probably regulated by exogamous marital rules (Breniquet 1987, 236). Halaf has always been presented for the unprecedented dimensions of its distribution, well visible in the painted pottery more than in anything else and interpreted as a form of expression of social identities. Even though less discussed, the preceding phases of the Neolithic already had richly decorated ceramics, that were expression of societies, the structure of which was already based on the same dynamics of social relation and organisation of the later Halaf, even though probably at a smaller scale. Several works have shown how pottery was “*part of the tool sets that enabled communities to establish networks*” (Nieuwenhuys 2017a, 26). The most symbolically charged pottery was the one used in moments of commensality, thus in events that imply interaction and the building or reinforcement of relations (Bernbeck 1999; Balossi Restelli 2006; 2017; Nieuwenhuys 2017b).

As underlined above, the layers of interaction within a group of people are multiple and complex and each is expressed by different practices and material objects. The spatial distribution and intensity of material objects is a potential indicator of the different scale of social networks in action. Pollock suggests that the wide distribution of cylindrical objects used as personal adornments during the Late Neolithic in Fars indicates the importance of social communication and implies that general ideas about bodily decoration and presentation were widely shared in the Neolithic of

Iran and Turkmenistan (Pollock 2015b, 47). Even though she was mainly interested in this as an indicator of equality within those communities, I believe her point is useful also in investigating layers of interaction: cylindrical bodily adornments are the expression of inter-community direct interaction. At the same time there were different types of adornments that might have represented either categories of people or another level of interaction. Similarly, shared painted motives of the Bashi pottery studied by Bernbeck (Bernbeck 2010) are the material expression of interaction at the inter-community level, but the specificity of gestures and sequence of brush strokes of each potter might have characterised these as identity markers at a household or kin level. The same object may thus represent and materialise distinct levels of social interaction which might not be totally understandable to all those who use them. Everyone is involved in varying networks of communication, through which people describe themselves; they both tell others and themselves who they are, and they constantly build and work on their identities (Holland et al. 1998). There is a “me”, there are multiple “we”, and there are “them”. Even with “them”, people will occasionally have to negotiate interaction. Material objects are the expression of all these identities and definitions.

The case of Hassuna

These observations have brought me to think about a group of objects produced by 7th millennium Neolithic communities of Western Asia which might be the expression of relations and interactions of different groups with neighbours and not-so-neighbours. In particular, my interest was taken by Late Neolithic Husking trays, found throughout Northern Mesopotamia during the 7th millennium.

Husking trays are shallow ceramic oval containers, rather coarse in paste and with abundant chaff temper, but significantly

varying in size. Their particularity is that the interior is deeply incised or impressed. The name was given to them by Fuad Safar and colleagues in the 1940s, as a suggestion that they might have been used to separate the cereal grains from their husks (Lloyd et al. 1945, 277), but already a few years later scholars were not too convinced of this interpretation (Braidwood et al. 1952, 11).

Though considered to be diagnostic of the so-called Hassuna communities, Husking trays are found over a much vaster area than that identified by the other Hassuna material traits – west to the Mediterranean (Braidwood and Braidwood 1960), south at the waterhead of the Diyala river (Odaka et al. 2019) and east

well into northern Iran (Voigt 1983; Tsuneki 2017, 129) –, and they span over a chronological period longer than that of the standard Hassuna phase.

Under the name of Hassuna are identified Neolithic communities that occupy the eastern Jazira during the second half of the 7th millennium (Akkermans and Schwartz 2003, 135–36; Nieuwenhuys and Akkermans 2019). Known sites are the eponymous site of Hassuna, Yarim Tepe, Kultepe, Tell Sotto, and Matarrah (Lloyd et al. 1945; Braidwood et al. 1952; Bader 1989; Bader et al. 1981; Merpert et al. 1981; Yoffee and Clark 1993). The earliest levels of all these sites are characterised by the so-called – but widely

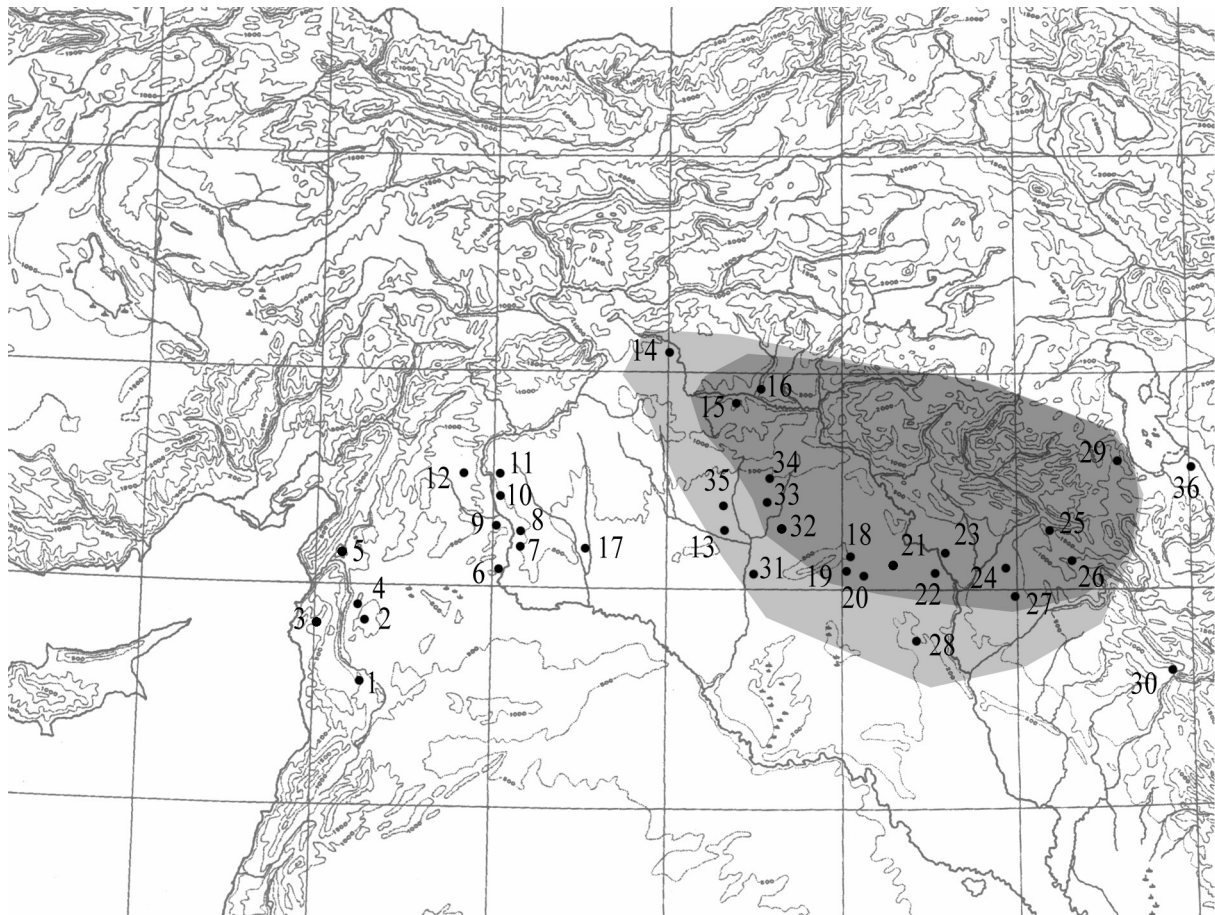


Fig. 1. Map with indication of sites in which Husking trays are mentioned. The grey area indicates the extension of the so-called Standard Hassuna assemblage; the lighter shading shows the area for which this distribution is hypothetical. Sites: 1. Shir, 2. Kherkh, 3. Ras Shamra, 4. Aray, 5. Amuq, 6. Halula, 7. Kosak Shamali, 8. Djad'e Mughara, 9. Amarna, 10. Akarçay, 11. Mezraa Teleilat, 12. Turlu, 13. Kashkashok, 14. Çayönü, 15. Hakemi Use, 16. Salat Camii, 17. Sabi Abyad, 18. Sotto, 19. Kultepe, 20. Yarimtepe, 21. Thalathat, 22. Hassuna, 23. Nineveh, 24. Nadar, 25. Diyan, 26. Shimshara, 27. Matarrah, 28. Umm Dabaghiyah, 29. Hajji Firuz, 30. Begum, 31. Umm Qseir, 32. Brak, 33. Arbid, 34. Küçük Kozluca, 35. Chagar Bazar; 36. Tappeh Sang-e Chakhmaq. Map by the author.

debated – Proto-Hassuna horizon, the settlement organisation of which is very similar to the later, fully Hassuna levels with rectangular multiple room domestic buildings, large, communal storage structures composed by many cell-like rooms and abundant external, possibly shared spaces for food manipulation and various other daily activities.

The subsistence economy of these communities is mainly based on agriculture and herding, with a majority of sheep and goat amongst domestic animals. There is thus probably a semi-mobile component in these communities, formed by the herders, and a more sedentary one dedicated to agricultural activities. Cereals as well as legumes are the main crops. The presence of large multiroomed buildings suggests a shared system for the storage of goods. There are no seals that would confirm the presence of a structured system for the communal management of goods, as those known from the Balikh area (Akkermans and Duistermaat 1996) and among later Halaf communities of the Hassuna area (Merpert and Munchaev 1987), but it is possible that the type of organisation was similar, even though it might have involved smaller groups.

Ceramic production shared by these communities (archaic and standard Hassuna ware) is of limestone- and chaff-tempered paste (it was possibly dung and coarse vegetal matter that were used for the latter; Petrova 2012) and surfaces could be coarse, smoothed, polished or slipped (Matthews 2000; Le Mière 2000; Anastasio et al. 2004). Red ochre was commonly added as a coloured slip in the archaic Hassuna, when painted and applied decoration are also found. Incised decoration becomes common in the later, so-called standard Hassuna phase. Shapes are open deep bowls, deep and at times slightly squatted jars with simple rims, necked jars and pithoi used for storage.

The distribution of this assemblage covers the Iraqi Jazira and beyond (Fig. 1); however, it

is very difficult to trace a precise boundary (but see Nieuwenhuyse 2013, Fig. 2 for the preceding phases). Overall, the sites known with this ceramic assemblage are still today very few (Morandi Bonaccossi and Iamoni 2015). Furthermore, there is a lot of debate over the definition and recognition of 7th millennium ceramic assemblages of northern Mesopotamia; Pre-Proto-Hassuna, Proto-Hassuna/Pre-Halaf, Hassuna are used to describe different moments of the 7th millennium and also different areas of Northern Mesopotamia, with ceramics that show varying similarities the interpretation of which is still matter of debate (Cruells and Nieuwenhuyse 2004; Nieuwenhuyse 2013; Nishiaki and Le Mière 2017; Odaka et al. 2019). The early date of many of the excavations furthermore determines the rarity of absolute dates, not helping to clear this confusion. Nieuwenhuyse has critically discussed the difficulty of using ceramic assemblages to define borders within this area in the phase that precedes the so-called Hassuna (Nieuwenhuyse 2013). It is beyond the scope of this paper to engage into this discussion, whilst I am concerned with the interpretation of one single object that is considered to be diagnostic of the Hassuna material culture, one specific artefact and its distribution, that might contribute to the discussion of the rich and extensive network of communications and exchange of people, goods and ideas which characterised Hassuna, as other Neolithic communities.

In detail and moving clockwise, the area that appears to be broadly characterised by a Hassuna ceramic assemblage is delimited by the sites of Shimshara to the east (Rania plain on the western Zagros foothills along the Lesser Zab) and by Matarrah to the south. To the west sites along the eastern Khabur catchment drainage certainly have Hassuna impressed and incised ware, as testified by surface and out of context material from Tell Brak, where the corresponding levels have never been excavated. Evidence from the western tributaries and the Balikh valley is

more difficult to interpret (Nieuwenhuys 1999; 2010; but see Tekin 2013 for a different interpretation). The sites along the Khabur proper and its western tributaries (Chagar Bazar, Boueid) have a ceramic assemblage that appears to be more linked to that of the Balikh, the sites of which, even though bearing strong resemblances both with Hassuna and Samarra pottery, present their own peculiarities and characters (Cruells and Nieuwenhuys 2004; Nieuwenhuys 1999). North, we know very little, but sites as Hakemi Use or Salat Camii Yani along the Turkish stretch of the Tigris are indicated by their excavators as “Hassuna/Samarra sites” (Tekin 2007; 2008; 2010). A thorough understanding of the relationship between these 7th millennium ceramic assemblages is indeed urgently needed, even though Olivier Nieuwenhuys had already provided us with an important hint more than twenty years ago, when he noted that overlapping distributions do not allow to identify proper homogeneous and regionally bounded ceramic assemblages (Nieuwenhuys 1999, 14; 2013, 116); this interpretation suggests the idea of groups involved in intense relations and networks, therefore creating hybrid ceramic styles that still today need much analysis to be thoroughly understood (Nieuwenhuys 2013, 118).

Hassuna Husking Trays as instruments of social communication

Husking tray distribution covers a much wider horizon, as well as a longer chronological span than that of the rest of the Hassuna assemblage; even so, in this framework we might still consider them as a typical object of Hassuna assemblage, which is however more or less common also among communities with ceramic assemblages that are in broad terms distinguishable from the Hassuna ones. Odaka and colleagues (Odaka et al. 2019, 77–78) have observed that husking trays “emerged in the mid 7th millennium in a broad swath of localised ceramic and cultural traditions” and that they

decline at the beginning of the 6th millennium, in the Early Halaf.

I personally believe that husking trays are a clue to the intensity and richness of the networks and relations between Pottery Neolithic groups. My interpretation springs from an observation related to their function; it is by now a shared opinion that Husking trays were used for the production of bread-like foods (Balossi Restelli and Mori 2014; Cruells and Nieuwenhuys 2004; Voigt 1983, 159; Taranto 2020) and my suggestion is that the particular bread that was made in them was a constituent of the meals that the Neolithic communities probably shared and that were one of the occasions to reinforce and reproduce relations, symbolically underlining the solidarity networks linking even very distant Neolithic groups. For this reason, the distribution of Husking trays goes beyond that of other attributes and specificities of the ceramic assemblages made and used by these same communities.

The presence of the impressions and incisions on the interior of husking trays creates an uneven surface that according to Balfet isolates the dough from the hot surface and enables it to rise without burning (Balfet 1975, 309). What I find most intriguing is the variety of shapes that the impressions and incisions can have (Fig. 2); do these have a meaning? To attempt an answer to this and without claiming in any way that I followed the strict scientific rules of experimental archaeology, I reproduced a husking tray and tried baking bread in it. My only objective was to understand whether the impressions would leave a trace on the food, and thus to find out whether different impressions would produce different breads. During the field season at Arslantepe, with the help of a potter, Fazıl Ercan, I made a couple of trays using local clay and added chaff as a temper. At a local and traditional bakery (with a domed oven fuelled by wood) we then made several baking experiments. Dough was

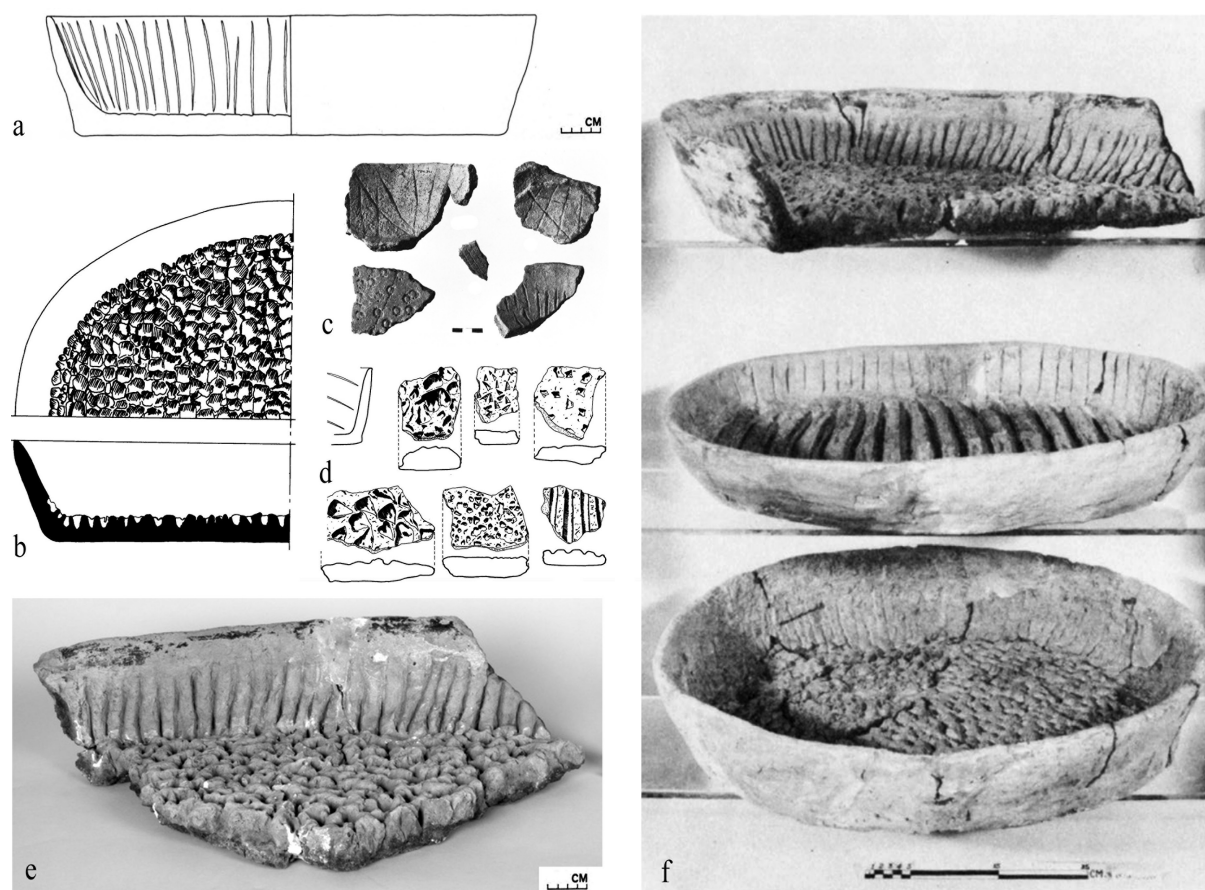


Fig. 2. Examples of Husking trays from Shimshara (a,c), Hassuna (f), Matarrah (b,d), unknown at Pennsylvania museum (e). From: [Braidwood et al. 1952, Figs. 9,16](#); [Lloyd et al. 1945, Pl. XVIII](#); [Mortensen 1970, Figs. 99, 101](#); https://www.penn.museum/collections/object_images.php?irn=182926.

the one used for bread today, thus clearly not the one used in the past. Only when we added some seed oil to the bottom of the tray the dough did not stick at all and the result was a perfect loaf, the back of which clearly showed the traces of the linear impressions we had made on the tray (Fig. 3).

Even though this little test tells us nothing of the specific food product that was made in them, nor how exactly it was baked, I like to believe this is a clue in favour of the idea that the variability of the impressions and incisions on the Husking trays might not be random, but represent groups, families, or communities. In this way, “bread” baked in

a Husking tray, which certainly constituted the most important part of the diet, as meaningfully underlined in both ancient and modern Near East by the fact that the same term is generically used to indicate food ([Delaney 1991](#)), would be “recognisable” and “personalised”.¹ The importance of meals in regulating bonds and reinforcing social relations has been discussed at length even in the specific context of Near Eastern Pottery Neolithic communities ([Pollock 2003; 2015a; Hayden 2001](#)); among Hassuna, community meals were characterised by the presence of special symbolically charged “breads” that we could interpret as identity markers. If this interpretation is correct, the signs on

1 The similarity of this act and of the sign left on the dough with that of impressing seals on the clay, that will very soon or nearly contemporarily appear in those same contexts, is striking.

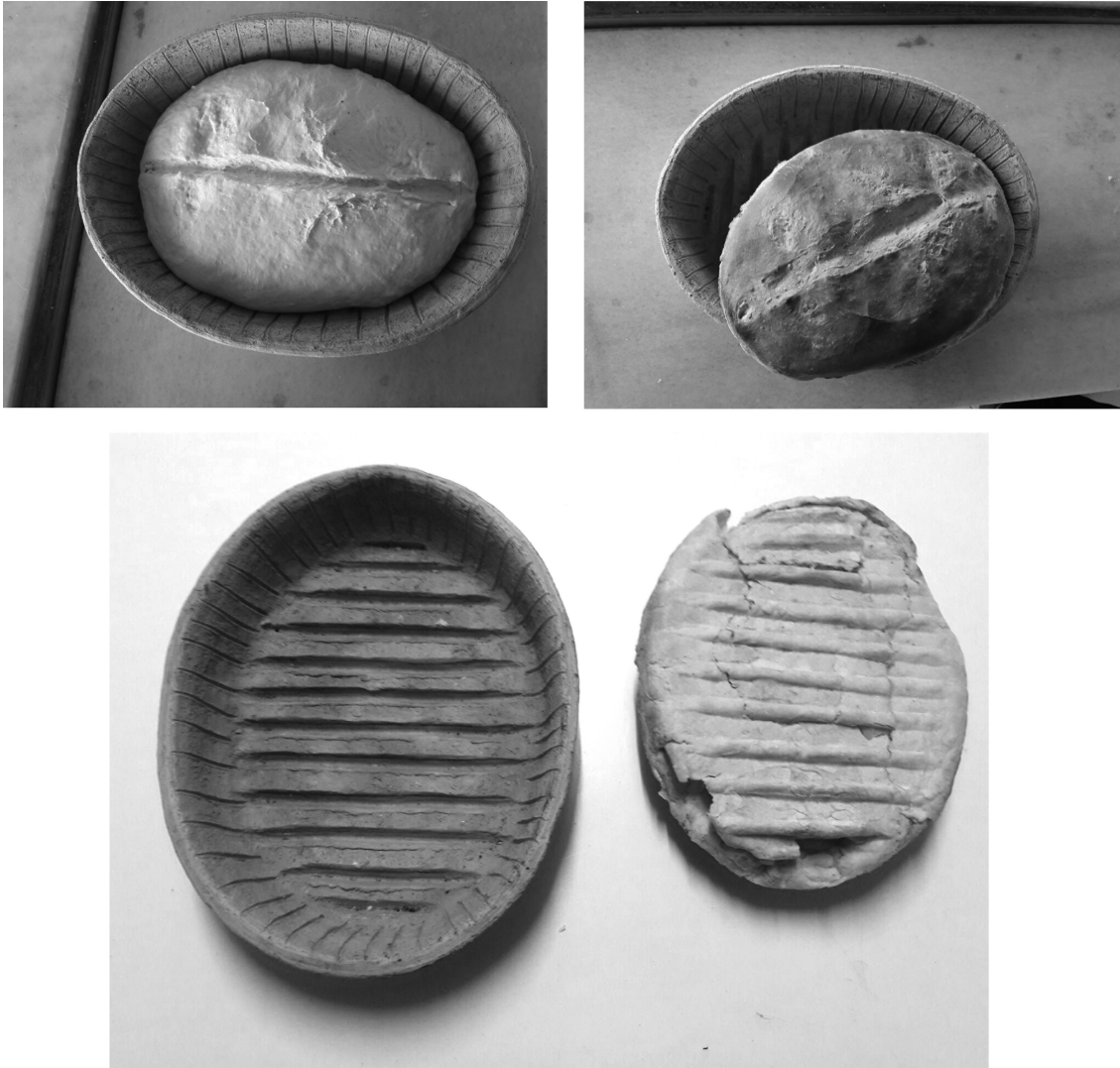


Fig. 3. Experimental bread baked in a modern “Husking tray” in Malatya by the author and the potter Fazıl Ercan. Photos: Francesca Balossi Restelli.

the bread were reproducing symbolically meaningful information to those who shared the meal and “broke the bread together.”

Trying to distinguish these symbols might be an impossible task, that needs to necessarily start from their stylistic examination. Attempting to analyse the distribution of the “styles” of these different impressions though is at the moment still a difficult operation, because of the partiality of published data, but it is certainly the first exercise that should be done, as the identification of any possible pattern in their distribution might indicate at an inter-regional level the geographical dimensions of specific networks and at an

intra-site level the number of “groups” or households within single communities. I do realise that the simpleness of these signs and their apparent high repetitiveness does not make of them a good instrument for personalisation, on the other hand, the function is not one of accountancy, but it might simply be a way to show, for example, that different participants are contributing to the meal.

A similar hypothesis can be proposed to understand the diffusion and use of another Neolithic object from a completely different area, which I believe though, might have had a similar role in building and maintaining large networks of communication and relations

between Neolithic communities during the 7th millennium: I am thinking of the very different *Pintaderas*. These are found in a totally different geographical area and would deserve a separate discussion which I do not intend to carry out here. However, I do want to mention both the analogous anomaly of their distribution well beyond that of other attributes of the material culture characterising the communities who used them, as well as the simplicity of its designs. *Pintaderas* have been found from Central Anatolia to the western coast of Asia Minor and way into the southern Balkans and Greece (Lichter 2005; 2011), in areas characterised by a non-unitary material culture. Scholars today agree that these were not seals, as first believed (Mellaart 1967; 1970); as Lichter has well synthesised, *Pintaderas* were “clay stamps [...] used to decorate various materials prone to fading, i. e. skin, leather, textiles or bread” (Lichter 2011, 38). Lichter pushes his argument further and suggests that “clay stamps might have been tools to reproduce culturally significant information – as part of an ornamental language.” Like Husking trays, I believe that these too could have been used to “decorate” and “personalise” something perishable (skin, clothes, bread, etc.) through which identities would be performed and shared. *Pintaderas* and Husking trays appear to be two objects with which Neolithic identities were reproduced; this would make of them the proof of physical contacts and the practice of constructing relations between contemporary but distinct communities.

Conclusions

The Neolithic communities of the Near East formed a vibrant and complex world

composed by extensive and increasingly expanding extensive networks of communication. Their multilayered social structures allowed to manage and maintain such wide interactions but needed abundant symbols through which to communicate and negotiate. As not all objects are used to negotiate identities in the same way and through the same practices, the apparently non-homogeneous distribution of material culture during the Late Neolithic period might be due to the richness of this symbolism and the vastness of its borders. If we bear this in mind and analyse the meaning and use of single objects together with their distribution, we might achieve a better understanding of the relations between communities. As demonstrated by the Dark Faced Burnished Ware (Balossi Restelli 2006), as well as by the later Halaf pottery (Charvát 2002; Spataro and Fletcher 2010), both most widely shared in their traits related to food consumption, the sharing of Husking trays too shows us how moments of commensality played a central role in identity construction of Late Neolithic communities. The possible use of *Pintaderas* for colouring body, textiles or other perishable objects reminds us though, that many others were the ways in which people would recognise and differentiate themselves.² Clothes, hairstyle, ornaments and tatoos certainly all played a major role in this too.

Acknowledgments

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² Intriguing, from this point of view, is the possibility that *Pintaderas* were used to impress bread, even though the rare presence of red pigment would seem to exclude this.

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