

A Comparison of Ceramics from Uruk and Susa circa 3000 B.C.

Kyra Kaercher

Faculty Sponsor: David Anderson, Department of Sociology and Archaeology

ABSTRACT

The study of pottery can be used to provide insight into past cultures. Pottery is ubiquitous on archaeological sites in the Near East and because of its durability; fragments often survive longer than artifacts made from less-durable materials. This study addresses the use of pottery to answer the question: Were Mesopotamia and Elam trading partners from 3000 to 2500 B.C.? Located in present day Iraq, Mesopotamia has evidence for early domestication of various plants and animals but was lacking certain types of semi-precious stones and ore for metal production. Elam, in present day Iran, possessed sources of both stones and metals that Mesopotamia did not have. The city state of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia and Susa in southeastern Elam went through similar social changes at about the same time. This makes for an easier comparison of trade between Mesopotamia and Elam. Uruk and Susa changed from smaller agricultural villages to massive city-states with evidence for increased class stratification. The rise of class stratification led to people with a surplus of goods, and a desire among the upper class for exotic items, which in turn led to an increase in trade to acquire them. However, these expensive items are scarce in the archaeological record and not easily traced. Pottery is unique to cultures and therefore it is easier to identify trade using pottery. This study will compare pottery from Uruk and Susa using stylistic attributes from both city-states. This will hopefully demonstrate that Mesopotamia and Elam were trading partners from 3000 to 2500 B.C.

INTRODUCTION

The study of pottery can be used to provide insight into past cultures. Pottery is ubiquitous on archaeological sites in the Near East and because of its durability often survives longer than artifacts made from less-durable materials. Further pottery and pottery sherds are less likely to be removed from sites, whereas gold, silver, and other precious items are often looted from sites. Mesopotamia and Elam have a rich association with both pottery and other materials. Located in present day Iraq, Mesopotamia has evidence for early domestication of various plants and animals but was lacking certain types of raw materials including semi-precious stones and ore for metal production. Elam, in present day Iran, possessed both stones and metals that Mesopotamia did not have. Uruk, a city-state in southern Mesopotamia and Susa, a city-state in south-eastern Elam went through similar social changes at about the same time. They changed from smaller village based agricultural societies to massive city-states with evidence for increased class stratification. The rise of class stratification led to people with a surplus of goods, and a desire among the upper class for exotic items, which in turn led to an increase in trade to acquire them. However, these exotic items are scarce in the archaeological record and not easily sourced, unlike pottery.

Pottery is unique to cultures and therefore it is easier to identify trade using pottery. In this study, I will compare pottery from Uruk and Susa using stylistic attributes of pottery from both city-states. Given the similarities between these city-states, like their size, similar histories, and social structures, I would assume that they were trading partners. From these two city states, I hope to see evidence of trade in the ceramic record. Pottery is more widely spread and found in the archaeological record than other materials, making it an ideal material from which to study evidence for trade. Looking at pottery, different cultures are easy to identify, because most have their own unique marks and decoration that are particular to that society. In the archaeological literature that I have read for this paper, most sources agree that there was trade between Uruk and Susa (Alden 1982; Edens 1992; Hole 1987).

BACKGROUND

This paper will begin with a brief background to the area and problem before discussing the types of pottery. As you can see in figure one, the time periods correlate with each other across the Near East. Most of the changes in

society happened around the same time in each culture. Uruk is located in Southern Mesopotamia and Susa is located in the Central Gulf region.

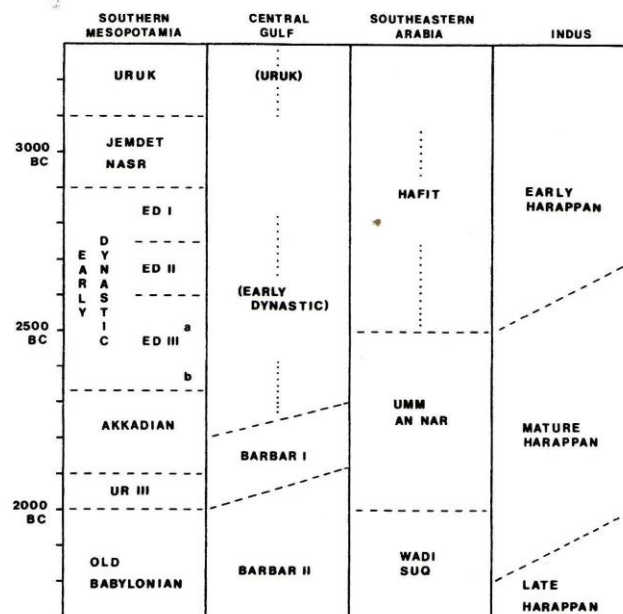


Figure 1. Time periods in the Near East (Alden 1982)

Early in the fourth millennium B.C., Mesopotamia witnessed the start of a new type of government. Mesopotamia organized itself into city-states which led to the rise of writing and monumental architecture (Mieroop 2007). Archaeologists have defined cities as a substantial number of people living with each other and having different occupations that are non-agricultural. Cities are also a centrally located point of collection and redistribution of goods (Mieroop 2007). According to Henry Wright, a state is defined as a society with specialized administrative activities, like control of business and decision making (1979). Lamberg-Karlovsky claim that a collection of cities makes up a state. A state is termed a “primary state” when it controls the states around it (1996). A city-state is like Feudal Europe. There is a main center with outlying towns surrounded by mostly agricultural sites. Increased agricultural production led to an excess of food. Since there was more food, there was a capacity for a rise in craftsmen since they did not have to work in the fields. These craftsmen made up the new middle class. By the Late Uruk Period, which begins around 3300 B.C., there was a highly stratified society that was led by priests and royalty, followed by craftsmen, and ended with the agricultural laborers.

“States had developed with a new type of importance never seen before and had influence over the lives of many. The newly emergent elites may have wished access to exotic materials, whose possession distinguished them from the rest of the people. Many luxury goods were only available outside Mesopotamia: semi-precious stones, gold, silver, and so on (Mieroop 2007).”

Based on Mieroop’s research, he is able to conclude that the elites wanted exotic materials. These precious materials were readily available in the regions surrounding Mesopotamia. Regions like Elam had materials such as gold, silver, and other precious materials.

In recent years, the government of Iran has not allowed a lot of excavations within its boundaries. Hence, it is hard to come up with a strict categorization of the background of the Susiana plain. What little excavation and survey that has been done tells us that Central Asian cultures are representative of a complex society (Alden 1982). They are very similar to the city-states of Mesopotamia. According to T.F. Potts, Susa had been an extension of Sumerian culture throughout the Late Uruk Period (1993). Le Brun’s excavations in 1973 show that during the Middle Uruk period, Susa was differentiated into a newer lower town and an older upper town (Wright 1979). Trade and other contacts, either warlike or peaceful, have been documented throughout this period. Potts also states

that Susa's archaeological record shows intrusive colonies or outposts along its fringes (Potts 1993). The Proto-Elamite settlements arose in new locations; however they were smaller than the previous cities.

In the Late Uruk period, the large city-states of Susa, Abu Fanduweh, and Chogha Mish dominated the Susiana plain. There was much competition between these centers (Alden 1982). Susa went through almost the same change as Uruk at the same time. An increase in population led to the complexity of social and political organization. This led to a demand for technology (Alden 1982).

Mesopotamia and Elam were trading partners because each site had items that the other wanted. This trade is documented in the glyphic, architectural, and ceramic styles (Lamberg-Karlovsky 1975). Mesopotamia was not a resource rich country. Domesticated goats, sheep, and to some extent oxen were present in Mesopotamia by 3000 B.C. along with domesticated plants like wheat and barley. Elam had a considerable range of metals and stones. Being located at the foot of the Zargos Mountains, they had access to metals, stones, and semi-precious stones (Alden 1982).



Figure 2. Map of Mesopotamia and Surrounding Area

Mesopotamia is divided up into four main environmental zones. They included marshy areas, grassy steppes, oak woodlands, and arid grasslands (Wright 1979). As figure two shows, there were a series of marshes between Uruk and Susa that would hinder direct trade. The trade could have taken place as down-the-line trade, trickle trade, or a reciprocal exchange (Potts 1993). Since there is a huge marshy area between Uruk and Susa because of the confluence of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, the trade routes would have to go around the marshes. Two of the possible routes that have been proposed are an overland route and a sea route. The overland route would stretch from Uruk, north to the Zargos Mountains, and then south to Susa. T.F. Potts makes a case that the trade occurred via the Persian Gulf and not overland (1993).

Background to the Problem

In the early fourth millennium B.C. a new type of pottery arose. This pottery was different from previous centuries in that the carefully fashioned and highly stylized pottery was replaced with crude wheel made plates, bowls, and jars. This later pottery was purely utilitarian, whereas in the eras before, it was more decorative (Mieroop 2007). With the growth of craftsmen, came a rise in the potters. According to Augusta McMahon (as cited in Snell 2007), pottery is closely linked with sedentism and farming. Most of the pottery from this time period was made with a straw temper. The vessels were more secure than pits or bins and also more movable. The pottery was used for cooking, serving, and eating (Snell 2007). Since the pottery is made with the same materials in both societies, they are easier to compare. This leaves a difference in vessel form and design elements. The few pieces of pottery that have been found in Susa are painted, however they are highly eroded. This makes them harder to identify (Alden 1982). Pottery is some of the only identifying factors that are left on these sites. Because of the individualistic nature of this pottery, it is easy to source this data.

METHODS

This research looks at sources that address the issue of trade and pottery in the Near East. Henry Wright states that there was a sudden shift in craft production around 3000 B.C. Items went from more individually crafted items to mass produced items (1979). This shift correlated with a shift from smaller shops to more localized regional centers. This seemed to be more active in Mesopotamia and not so much in Susa. According to Gregory Johnson’s research, the ceramics recovered in the Susiana plain are handmade and concentrated in the three main communities. These communities were Susa, Abu Fanduweh, and Chogha Mish. To get a comparative sample large enough to compare against Uruk, I placed all three of these cities in the same category. Data like drawings, tables, and written descriptions of the ceramics were used to make the comparisons between Uruk and Susa.

DATA

The information for Figure 3 was compiled from *Chronologies in Old World Archaeology* by Robert Erich (1993) and *The Archaeology of Western Iran* by Frank Hole (1987). I looked at both the designs and the descriptions that were provided in these sources and then compared one against the other and identified those pottery types uniquely Uruk and Susa and then the ones that were the same.

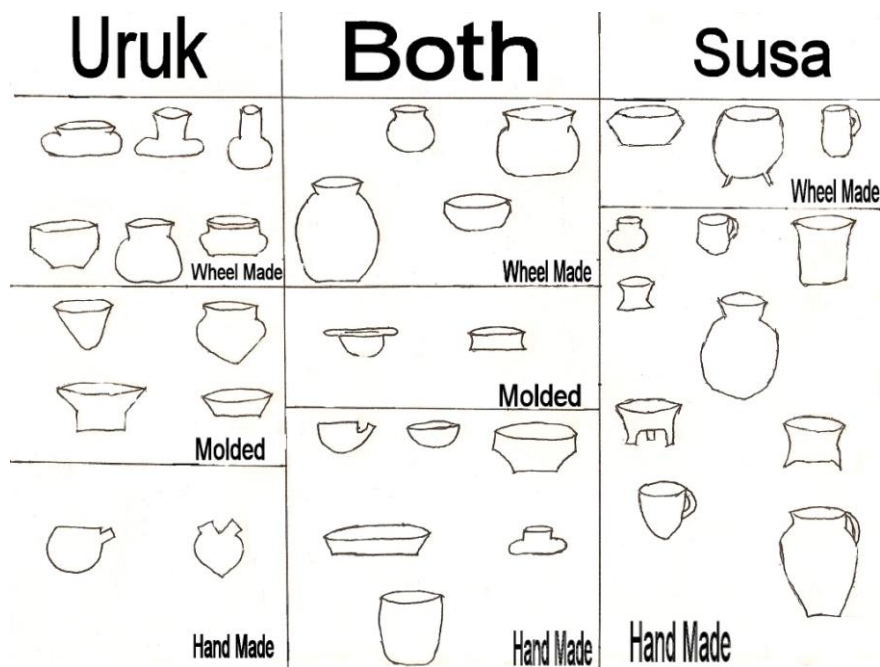


Figure 3. A Comparison of Ceramic Shapes and Methods of Manufacture.

Wheel made ceramics had flatter bottoms and an even wall thickness. This type of ceramic is less difficult to mass produce. Molded ceramics are the least difficult of all to mass-produce since the potter is just molding clay around a pre-made form. These ceramics are easy to identify because they are more crudely made than wheel made ceramics, and usually do not have a rounded upper body, since it would be hard to remove the mold. Lastly, there are the hand made ceramics. These are more individual, have the crudest workmanship, and are characterized by spouts, legs, and handles. By comparing all the ceramics, Uruk pottery is more mass produced based on there being more wheel made and molded forms, and Susa is more likely individual production because the majority were hand made.



Figure 4. Bevel Rimmed Bowls

The bevel rim bowls have been found all over the near east, thus leading some archaeologists to hypothesize that there were mini colonies along the fringes of contact (Mieroop 2007). These potters specialized in mass production most noted in the archaeological record through the beveled rimmed bowls. These bowls were typically made in molds, and archaeologists like Marc Van de Mieroop (2007) have hypothesized that they may be measuring cups for measuring out grain rations to the general populous. Augusta McMahon states that these bowls could be used as a ration bowl, salt containers, bread molds, yogurt containers, offering bowls, and even dishes for the banquets of the rich. However the most accepted hypothesis is that they were ration bowls since archaeologists have shown that they hold enough grain to make one loaf of bread that would feed one family for one day (Hole 1987).

The data for this section came from Charlotte Ziegler's book, *Die Keramik Von Der Qal'a Des Hağgi Mohammed* (1953). Ziegler identified 153 different decorative motifs on the ceramics from the site of Hağgi Mohammed. She then tallied the occurrence of all 153 motifs at other sites across the greater Near East. In Figures 5 – 7 all the sites are listed in order from west to east with each different color in the graph representing a different stylistic pottery motif. However, since Ziegler only provided information relative to the presence or absence of a particular motif at a site rather than the quantity of ceramics recovered, the graphs depict the presence or absence of a particular motif at each site. The peaks in the graph show that those sites have a lot of different motifs.

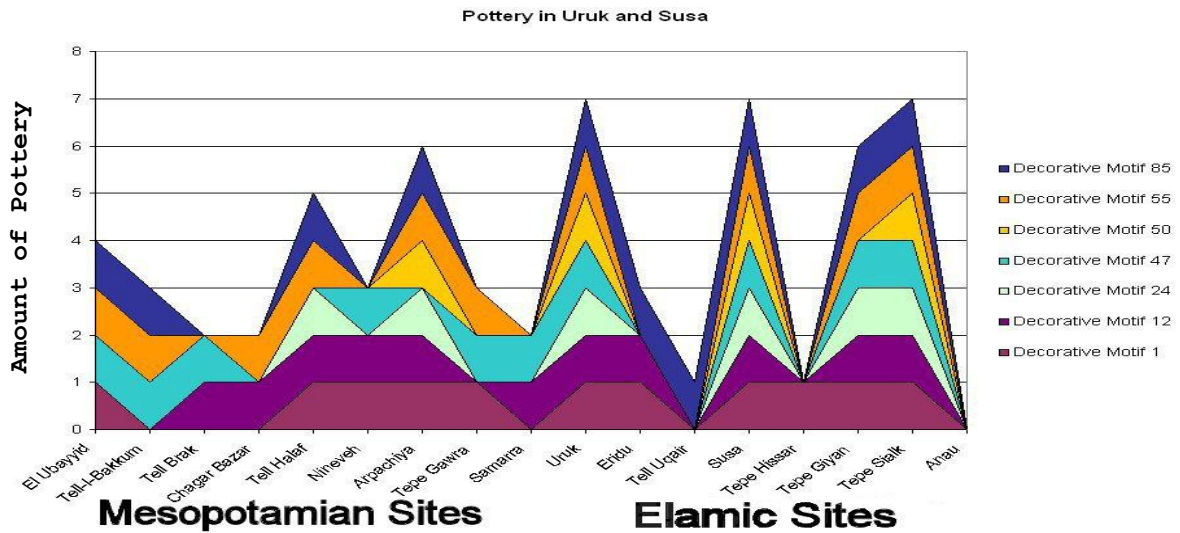


Figure 5. Graph of Motifs

Figure 5 portrays the ceramics that appeared in both Uruk and Susa. This graph shows that they also appear in Tell Halaf, Arpachiya, and Tepe Sialk indicating that these motifs are represented all across the Near East. This is interesting because it shows that not only were Uruk and Susa in contact, but that contact spread from the coast of the Mediterranean (El Ubayyid) to present day Afghanistan (Anau).

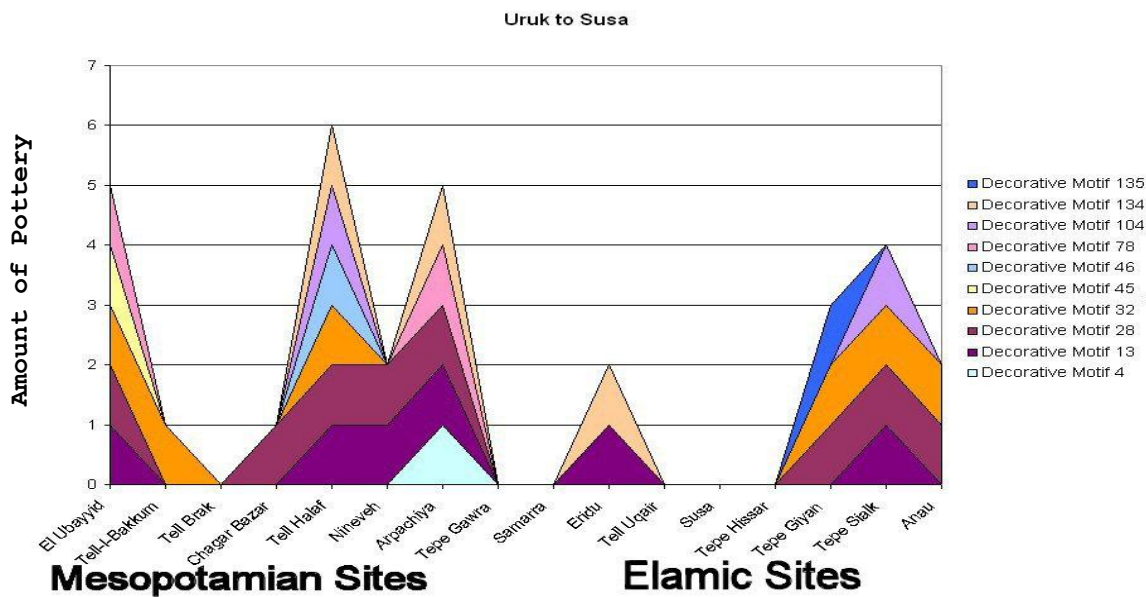


Figure 6. Graph of motifs in Uruk but not Susa

Figure 6 portrays the motifs that were found in Uruk but not found in Susa with the removal of the Uruk column, since it obscured the patterns for the rest of the sites. The sites of El Ubayyid, Tell Halaf, Arpachiya, and Tepe Sialk contain the same motifs as Uruk. Even though Susa does not have these motifs, Tepe Sialk, which is farther east, does. Based on this we can assume that there was probably some sort of trade through the Susa region even though the motifs have not been discovered at the site of Susa itself.

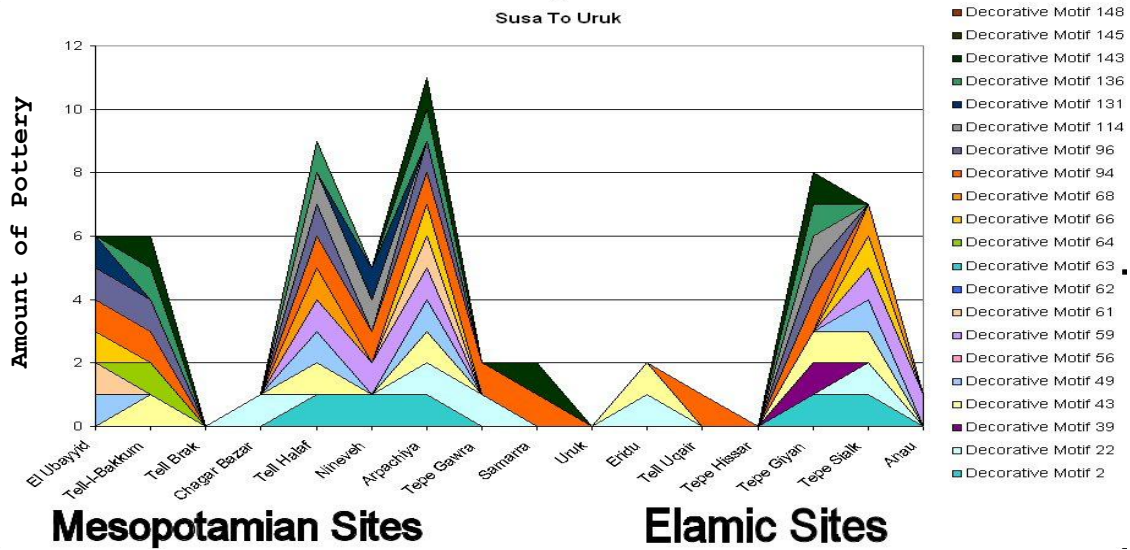


Figure 7. Graph of Motifs found in Susa not in Uruk

Figure 7 portrays the motifs that appeared in Susa but not in Uruk with the removal of the Susa column so that the differences between the other sites were shown better. First off, there is a lot more motifs that are identified at Susa than Uruk or even the two sites combined. Looking at the peaks, the motifs are found at Tepe Giyan, Arpachiya, Tell Halaf, and Tell-I-Bakkum. Even though the motifs are not appearing at Uruk, they are appearing at sites east of Uruk, so it is plausible that there was contact between west and east.

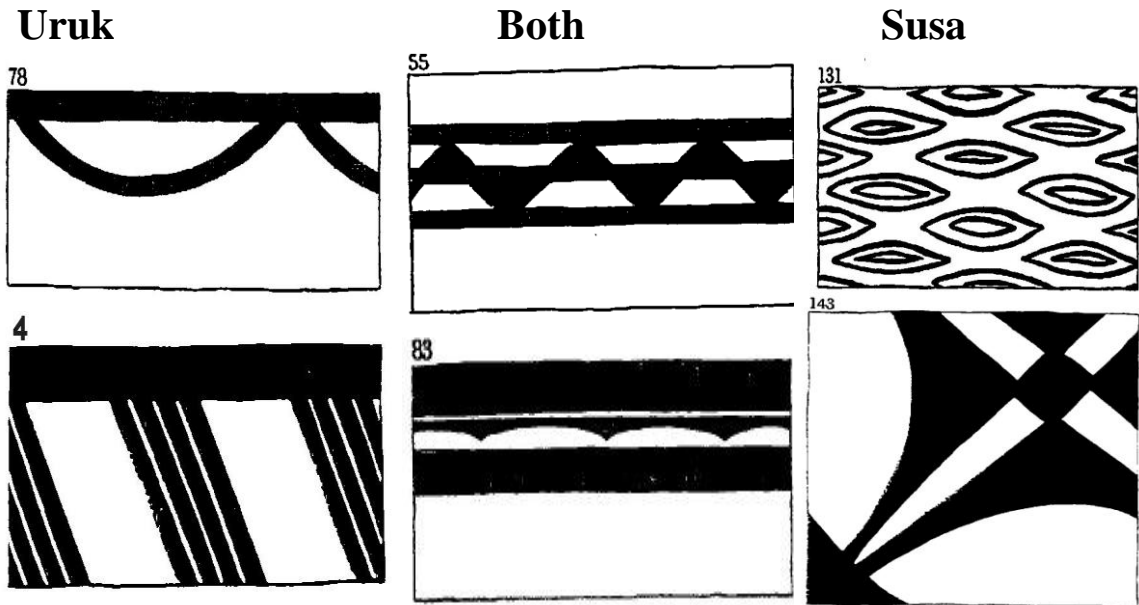


Figure 8. Types of Motifs in Uruk and Susa

Figure 8 shows the differences in design motif between Uruk and Susa based on the designs of the motifs found in Die Keramik Von Der Qal'a Des Hağgi Mohammed. The Uruk motifs are more geometrical with the circles and lines. Most of these motifs are around the rims of the pots. The Susa motifs are more abstract and tend to cover the

bodies and even the insides of bowls. The Uruk motifs are more functional with little artistic importance while the Susa motifs are more for decoration.

CONCLUSION

In summary, based on the pottery styles, designs, and methods of manufacture shows strong evidence for trade. Uruk pottery is more functional, mass produced, and had a standardized production. Susa pottery is more decorative while being productive, individually produced and had small-scale production. Since archaeologists have discovered conglomerations of both areas³, there was some sort of contact between the two areas. Through this study of pottery from Uruk and Susa, I hope to have demonstrated evidence of trade between these two city-states. I do not mean trade as in one site is making the items that are found at the other site, but more, that the ideas from one site are appearing at the other. Demonstrating this trade through pottery is important because it allows us to infer the trade of more precious items that are less frequently recovered because of other factors. Further, and perhaps more important, along with the flow of materials goods, ideas are also exchanged, from one society to another. The relationship between the cultures might have been more pronounced than thought before. In conclusion, looking at pottery from Uruk and Susa demonstrates trade between these two societies.

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