

# Results about the Ḫalaf and ‘Ubaid Periods in Northern Mesopotamia after the Excavations at Tell Ṭawīla and Tell Ḫalaf as well as the Wādī Ḫamar Survey

by Jörg Becker

During the last decades archaeological research on the Ḫalaf culture has brought substantial progress towards a deeper understanding of that widespread cultural phenomenon in Northern Mesopotamia. In particular the important excavations at Tell Ṣabī ‘Abyad I in the Syrian Balīḫ valley as well as other investigations in the Jezirah of Northern Iraq and Northeastern Syria (*i.e.* Šāḡir Bāzār or Tell Boueid II), and along the Syrian Euphrates (Tell Ḫalūla), or at Domuztepe in southeastern Turkey have shown that the Ḫalaf culture emerged out of older traditions of the pottery Neolithic during the last centuries of the late 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BC.

In light of this background the re-evaluation and chronological classification of the results from the old excavations at Tell Ḫalaf, excavated under the direction of Max von Oppenheim before and after the First World War, has to be seen. The Ḫalaf pottery published by Hubert Schmidt, lacking a clear stratigraphical context, was seen by later archaeologists (*i.e.* Thomas Davidson) – based on chronological comparisons – often in the context of the developed Ḫalaf culture (Ḫalaf IIa/b), which was well represented at the site through pottery types and motifs. It was also clear from the old excavations that the oldest settlement at Tell Ḫalaf began during an older stage named »*altmonochrom*«, but its exact position and relation to the following Ḫalaf period could for a long time only be approximately calculated. Within the framework of recent research it is now possible to show also at Tell Ḫalaf a continuous development, which started during the stage of the »*altmonochrom*« period (from ca. 6500 BC onwards), leading from the Proto-Ḫalaf stage through all phases of the Ḫalaf period, including the final Ḫalaf-‘Ubaid-Transition (ca. 5300–5200 BC), and indicating a local settlement history of more than thousand years. Questions relating to a continuity into the following northern ‘Ubaid period or if the settlement shifted to other areas, can only be answered after further research at the site (Fig. 1).

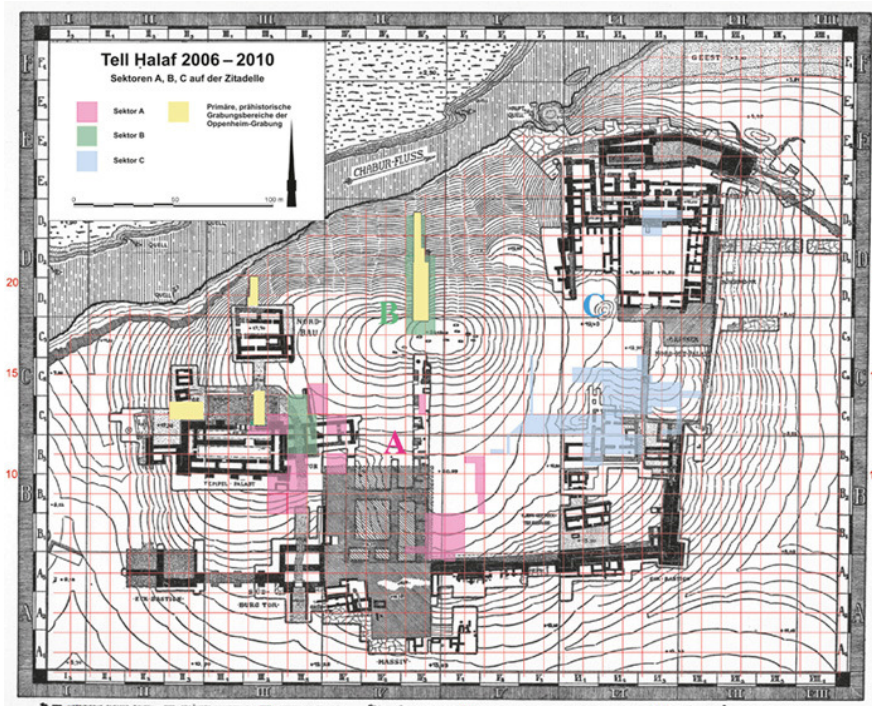


Fig. 1 Plan of the citadel from Tell Ḫalaf with old and new excavation trenches (after Schmidt 1943: Addendum 2, with additions by G. Elsen-Novák and J. Becker)

The new excavations at Tell Ḫalaf citadel mound along the northern slope and at the Western palace with the adjacent Scorpion-Gate brought to light the younger phases of the Ḫalaf period, which can be dated

through the pottery into the middle Ḥalaf stage (Ḥalaf IIa), but in greater scale the late Ḥalaf phase during the middle of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Ḥalaf IIb) was uncovered; these later phase could be dated more precisely through two new radiocarbon dates around c. 5500 calBC. The architecture is characterized by the typical round buildings of the Ḥalaf period (»*tholoi*«), often with a rectangular antechamber (»*dromoi*«). The inner diameter of these mudbrick houses ranges between ca. 3–7 meters. The bigger round structures having internal triangular enhancements and find with their cross-shaped plans good parallels to contemporaneous houses at Yarimtepe III for instance. It can not be excluded that in comparison with the adjacent smaller keyhole shaped buildings at Tell Ḥalaf some social stratification might be visible, which maybe can be interpreted as relating to a »*Big-Man*«-type model (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Tell Ḥalaf. Key-hole shaped building 5 on the northern slope (Area 6719).

In the case of the settlement structure the new excavations made also clear that in prehistoric times the citadel at Tell Ḥalaf has to be subdivided into some smaller fractions. This is a well known settlement structure during the late Neolithic and Chalcolithic periods in Upper Mesopotamia, where smaller kinship related groups settled on different, often adjacent mounds of one site. Thus the prehistoric settlement at the citadel of Tell Ḥalaf appears as a cluster of some smaller settlement structures which were at least partly contemporary, in other cases also the shift of some structures seems to be indicated, well established for example at sites like Tell Ṣabī ‘Abyad I or at Yarimtepe I–III (Fig. 3).

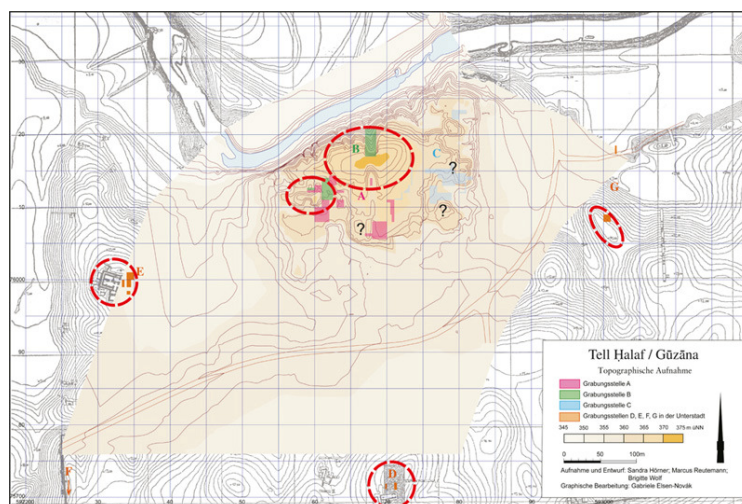


Fig. 3 Tell Ḥalaf. Reconstructed settlement system in the area of the citadel and lower town

In the frame of the new research it was also evident that in the area of the later Iron Age lower town different hamlet-like structures of the Ḥalaf period could be verified, which seem to be occupied by few families and just for a short time period. In general, such a settlement structure fits very well with similar structures which can be found not only in other parts of the Khabur triangle, but are also well known from the Balīḥ and Tigris valleys, for instance.



The main settlement at the citadel of Tell Ḥalaf is seen in such a settlement system as a kind of bigger village with its function as a trading post for the exchange of goods and as a meeting point, for example in the case of obsidian, whereas the interpretation as production center for bi- and polychrome painted pottery should be taken carefully.

In contrast, a different development and other aspects appear at the western adjacent region of the Wādī Ḥamar area and especially through the excavations at Tell Ṭawīla. Here as well the settlement system consists of a few village-like sites settled for several centuries, and a greater amount of small hamlets sometimes used as seasonal occupied stations at least for a part of the society.

In difference to the neighbouring Balīḥ- and Ḥābūr regions, an intensive settlement history in the region around Tell Ḥuēra starts just at the beginning of the 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC, after the Ḥalaf culture has evolved out of the older traditions of the Pottery Neolithic period along the greater rivers. Especially the mixed subsistence basis of agriculture and animal husbandry on the one hand and hunting on the other seems to have made this region attractive at this time. This can be shown at the site of Tell Ṭawīla with its position at the southern border where rain-fed agriculture is still possible today, and where from the beginning of the settlement hunting onager – and in lesser degree on gazelle – was an important component of the subsistence strategy. However, the subsistence mainly based upon the agriculture of emmer as well as on animal husbandry, especially sheep/goat, supplemented by pig and cattle husbandry.

With an estimated size of ca. 2 ha at maximum and a calculated population of around 50–100 persons, Tell Ṭawīla represents a Ḥalafian village continuously occupied during ca. 5850–5600 calBC, so for 250–300 years, based on the comparisons of the pottery and some radiocarbon dates (Fig. 4).

Through parallels of the pottery the beginning of the settlement may have started during the Ḥalaf Ia phase and shows some affinities to the Early Ḥalaf pottery from Tell Ṣabī ‘Abyad I. But the following levels finds its closest parallels in the Ḥalaf Ib phase, and the most recent levels – excavated on a bigger scale – can be paralleled at best with the Ḥalaf IIa phase. A gradual, continuous development at Tell Ṭawīla is visible which fit well into the general development of the Ḥalafian culture in the northern Jezirah.

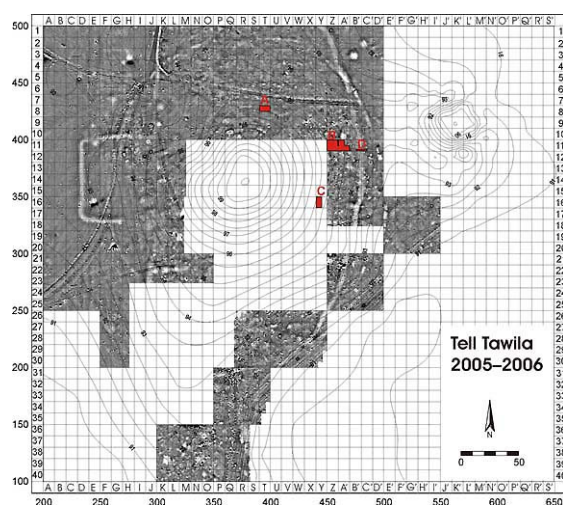


Fig. 4 Tell Ṭawīla. Topographic plan with excavation areas

The architecture at Tell Ṭawīla also consists of the typical round houses, and their inner diameter of ca. 3,5–5,5 m fits well into the known size range for living and working spaces during that period. On a larger scale, and over several levels in area B the development of a »household« could be observed which was confirmed by finds in the two larger round houses. One of these larger round houses was provided with a double-oven of the single updraught chamber kiln type and was part of a working area, maybe also for the local production of pottery which is affirmed at Tell Ṭawīla by several wasters. The arrangement of these two round buildings together with a courtyard on their southern part is at least enclosed on three sides by walls and separated from other round buildings by small alleys, but makes clear that just some small parts of the village could be uncovered (Figs. 5 and 6).



Fig. 5 Tell Ṭawīla. Section B. Ḥalafian round buildings of Level B 4

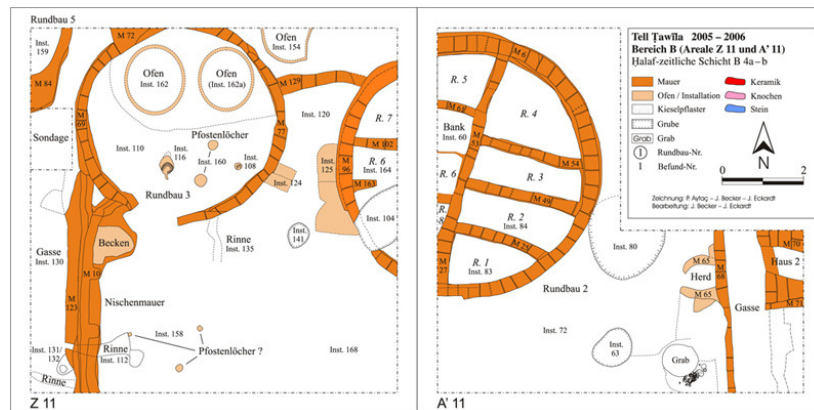


Fig. 6 Tell Ṭawīla. Section B. Plan of the Halafian round buildings of Level B 4

As usual, the courtyards could be used intensively for different daily activities as for example for food processing. In parallel with the high percentage of hunting (ca. 18–30 %) ceramic scrapers are the most important small find category, with more than 300 examples and were perhaps used for scraping animal hides, whereas arrow-heads of different types and sling missiles could be used as hunting weapons. In the early 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC mixed subsistence was not only practiced at Tell Ṭawīla itself, but is part of older traditions well known for the early Pottery Neolithic phase, at Umm Dabaghiyah for example. Ceramic scrapers are also known from the Wādī Ḥamar survey at the site of ‘Aḡīla-South, ca. 12 km southeast from Tell Ṭawīla in a similar position at the southern border of the rain-fed zone and indicating that a similar mixed economy should be expected. Compared with other sites of the Ḥalaf culture, these examples for the mixed economy and the not unimportant role of hunting are quite early in the Ḥalaf sequence which often can be found slightly later, *i.e.* since the phase Ḥalaf IIa (*e.g.* at Tell Umm Qṣīr oder Šams ed-Dīn).

The analysis of the survey ceramics as well as from the pottery of the excavations at Tell Ṭawīla indicate that during the Ḥalaf IIb phase (late Ḥalaf) a shift of the settlement system in the northern regions of the survey area took place, *i.e.* into regions with better conditions for agriculture and animal husbandry on a more permanent basis. This change find good parallels in similar modified settlement patterns of the neighbouring Balīḥ- and Ḥābūr regions during the Ḥalaf-‘Ubaid-Transition. In these regions such a shift of settlements to the north were connected with the abandonment of the current subsistence strategy, and can be seen as an indication that the mixed economy as well as the mobile living practice with seasonal occupations well known for the Ḥalaf period were dismissed in favor of hamlets and villages with clear focus on agriculture and animal husbandry occupied for several centuries. For Tell Tawila, over a distance of about 800 years, a resettlement of this kind as a small hamlet took place at the site and is indicated just through pottery dating to the northern ‘Ubaid 4 period around the middle of the 5<sup>th</sup> millennium BC (Fig. 7).

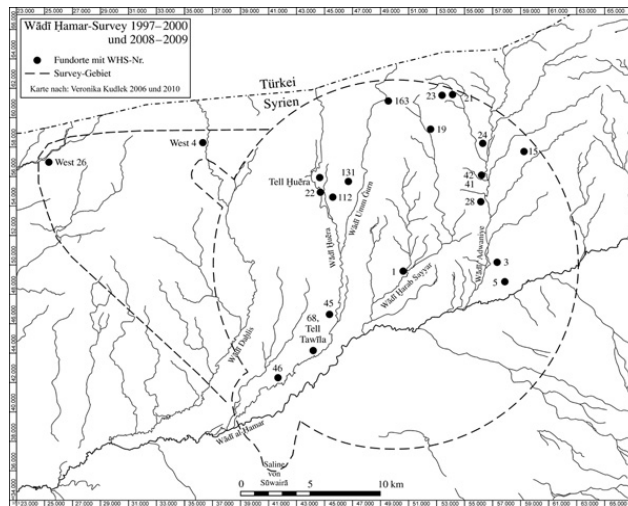


Fig. 7 Wādī Ḥamar-Survey. Archaeological sites of the Ḥalaf- and 'Ubaid periods

That the modifications from the Ḥalaf to the northern 'Ubaid period during the late 6<sup>th</sup> and early 5<sup>th</sup> millennia BC passed in its social organization to merely gradual changes can be seen also through the reflection of the architecture and settlement systems. A good example for this slow modification for example can be seen in the case of the tripartite house type with central hall (»Mittelsaalhaus«) which is mostly seen as indication for a new form of family organization and interpreted as a shift from nuclear families of the Ḥalaf period to extended families of the northern 'Ubaid stages. In particular the geographical and chronological distribution showed clearly that this new building type, influenced by contacts with southern Mesopotamia, established in northern Mesopotamia only in the frame of long-term developments and existed widely in the north just during the late northern 'Ubaid stage ('Ubaid 4) and the following Late Chalcolithic period. In some other cases a trend could be shown that related the new architecture to older agglutinate traditions of the earlier pottery Neolithic period, or in another cases and side by side with the above mentioned house types the local tradition of round houses still existed for some generations. In the background of changing living and subsistence strategies it may be assumed, as mentioned earlier by other scholars, that this change would be an attempt to have everything under the roof of one bigger, rectangular building (Fig. 8). Additionally, the Ḥalaf-'Ubaid-Transition, which had been oriented for a long time on the excavations at Tell 'Aqab in the Khabur triangle, is in northeastern Syria especially elusive and difficult to define. Excavations in the last decades made clear that the characteristic vessel type of bow-rim jars as typical shape of that Ḥalaf-'Ubaid-Transition is not suitable to mark this stage, because in western parts of the Ḥalaf culture this shape existed since the Ḥalaf IIA phase (Domuztepe), as well as in northern Syria during the Ḥalaf IIB phase (Tell Ḥalūla, Ḥirbet eš-Šenef, Tell Ṭawīla or Šāḡir Bāzār) (Fig. 9).

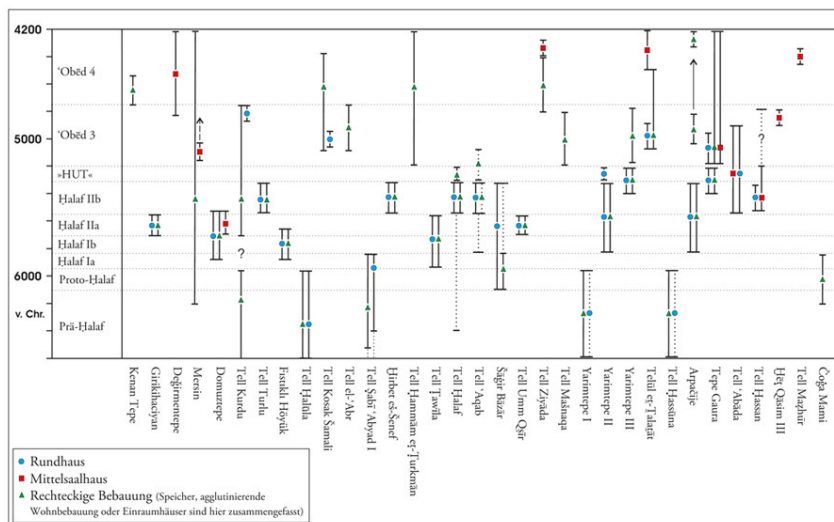


Fig. 8 Chronological and regional distribution of characteristic house types of the Ḥalaf- and 'Ubaid periods in Northern Mesopotamia und adjacent regions

While contacts and exchange between the ‘Ubaid culture of southern Mesopotamia and Halaf settlements in the Ḥamrīn region are well known, for the northwestern Halaf region the case of Domuztepe show similar contacts of this site with neighboring regions along the Levantine coast. It is interesting to note that through earlier excavations at Tell Kurdu in the Amuq region the Halaf expansion to the Levantine region could be emphasized, but the case of Domuztepe make now clear that during the phase Halaf IIA a reciprocal influence from western adjacent regions took place.

In the central regions of the Halaf culture, *i.e.* the Jezirah, such influences in the frame of some kind of »acculturation«-process became visible comparatively late (around 5300–5200 BC).

In general, this transformation can be seen in the frame of long-term developments in the background of multi-directional networks which lead to regionally and chronologically different characteristics, and therefore pass into the realm of some kind of »natural distribution« in the sense of asynchronous transformations.

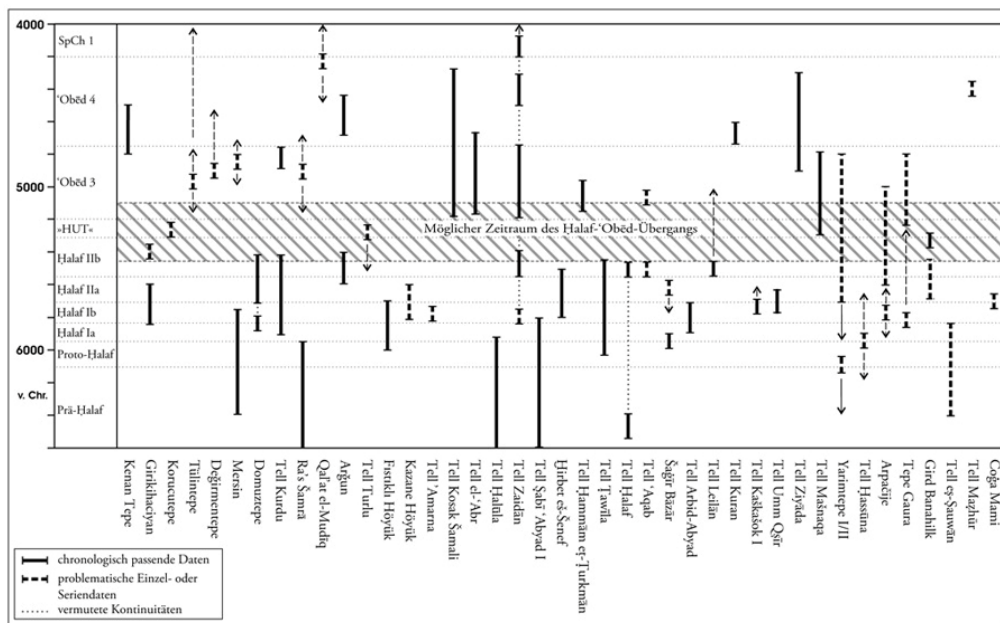


Fig. 9 Stratigraphic presentation of the cal. <sup>14</sup>C-dates for the Halaf and ‘Ubaid periods in Northern Mesopotamia und adjacent regions (after: S. Campbell: Fig. 14; modified by the author)

Whereas inspirations from adjacent regions were adopted and reciprocated *e.g.* the praxis for the usage of stamp seals which found relevance into the ‘Ubaid-horizon, we have to keep in mind that neither the often estimated population pressure nor migrations mainly stood behind these changes. So, as the economy and social organization of the Halaf culture was for a long time during the early 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC the ‘appropriate’ way of life, the people of the Halaf culture itself adopted during the late 6<sup>th</sup> millennium BC new forms of production and new forms of social organization, moving away from their mobile, partly seasonal life style, and this transformation also includes regional and chronological differences. Regarding ritual practices there are just some restricted statements possible, because only the archaeological record of this sphere (*e.g.* terracotta figurines) is preserved. But it is characteristic for both following cultures of Upper Mesopotamia that – in difference for example to the Early Neolithic period – no evidence for ritual buildings exist. Instead, cultic and ritual practices took place on specified occasions also in the residential areas, as known *e.g.* from Değirmentepe for the late northern ‘Ubaid period.

Beside terracotta figurines, the most impressive evidence for ritual practices during the Halaf period at Tell Ṭawīla is an ensemble as part of a hunting-equipment which consists of different flint blades and arrowheads and a beautifully worked marble mace-head. The intentional destruction and burning of these objects in the frame of some kind of »ritual depositum« is a common praxis, well known at other sites as well, but the concrete occasion for such an act, as at Tell Ṭawīla, is unknown to us (Fig. 10).



Fig. 10 Tell Ṭawīla. Mace-head and lithic assemblage (Obsidian) from section B (Level B 2)

Important results for the production and the origin of the Ḥalaf and ‘Ubaid ceramics of Tell Ḥalaf, Tell Ṭawīla and the Wādī Ḥamar region came also from the natural scientific analysis made by K. Drüppel and M. Helfert. In opposition to the widely accepted opinion that Ḥalaf pottery was fine levigated, both scientists come to the conclusion that indeed finer clay occurrences were now preferred, but the great variety of different inclusions speaks against an intentional levigation process of the clay sources used. Also, an often estimated exchange of pottery vessels which should have influenced the oft-identified homogeneous appearance of the Ḥalaf pottery, cannot be deduced from the natural scientific results.

Just one of 123 analysed pottery samples could perhaps be interpreted as an import from Tell Ṭawīla to Tell Ḥalaf. But generally, the chemical fingerprint for samples of both regions is quite different. Also for the ‘Ubaid pottery of both regions it seems sure that they were locally, or at least regionally produced. Certainly, some analyzed samples with Sāmarrā’-influence of the old excavations at Tell Ḥalaf which were interpreted by H. Schmidt about 80 years ago in part as Sāmarrā’-imports and in part as imitations of Sāmarrā’-style can mineralogically and chemically not be separated from the Ḥalaf and ‘Ubaid samples from Tell Ḥalaf and should be therefore all seen as local imitations in Sāmarrā’-style.

(The English summary was kindly corrected by Dr. Federico Buccelatti, Berlin)