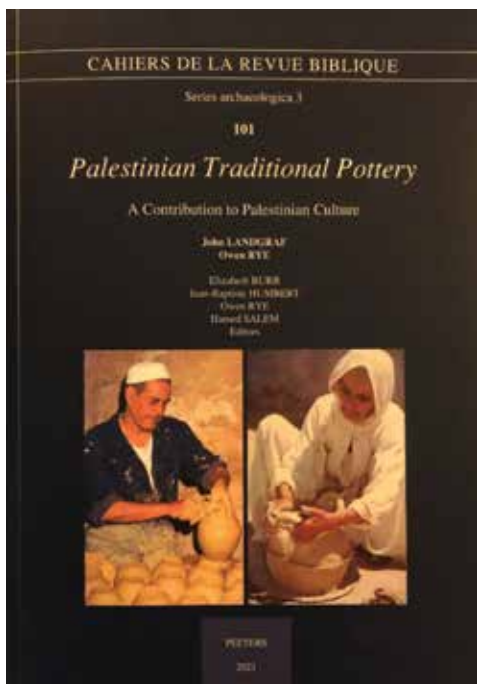


BOOK REVIEW

Palestine Traditional Pottery: Craft and Commerce

Review by Karel Vriezen

Palestinian Traditional Pottery: A Contribution to Palestinian Culture, by John Landgraf and Owen Rye, edited by Elizabeth Burr, Jean-Baptiste Humbert, Owen Rye, and Hamed Salem; foreword by Jean-Baptiste Humbert, introduction by Hamed Salem. Cahiers de la Revue biblique, Series archaeologica 3. Leuven: Peeters, 2021. xxxii + 329 pp. €88 (paperback). ISBN: 9789042947085



Abstract

This book stands out as a scholarly testimony to the disappearing craft of traditional pottery making by Palestinian women and men potters. The material it assembles, both textual and pictorial, is based on field research completed in the 1970s by two very different, yet complementary, researchers and authors. For various reasons, this material lay dormant over four decades until it was retrieved and returned to the light of day. The publication of this book followed the death of one of the authors, John Landgraf in 2017 in the U.S. Fortunately, his co-author, Owen Rye in Australia, still had most of the written material in his possession, which was then digitized, arranged, and edited. The graphic material, especially the black and white and beautiful color photographs, taken by the authors, was also gathered and cataloged for reproduction in the book, with outstanding results. The volume invites readers into the two distinct worlds of Palestinian women and men potters at work in the 1970s: the women in their village homes, and the men in their mostly urban workshops. With Palestinian culture under siege, the study presented here aims to record and preserve a key part of that culture. It also memorializes the life and work of John Landgraf, who lived in Jerusalem from 1965 to 1980, and dedicated himself to archaeology, ethnography, and social work.

Keywords:

Palestinian traditional pottery; women potters; men potters; Palestinian villages; pottery-making centers; pottery workshops; clay and temper; pot building; pot throwing; pot firing.

Palestinian Traditional Pottery may be compared to the reference works on the culture of Palestine by great folklorists like Taufiq Canaan, Khalil Ra‘d, and Gustaf Dalman, not only because of its noteworthy text but also because of the hundreds of beautiful color photographs that accompany the text. It is published as a memorial volume to John Elsemore Landgraf, remembered as a most modest yet striking personality among the archaeologists in Jerusalem in the 1970s. Following his death in 2017 in his homeland, the United States, his wife, Elizabeth Burr, and several former colleagues decided to edit his written notes from the 1970s on women potters in ten West Bank Palestinian villages and their home-crafted pottery. When Australian potter Owen Rye was contacted, he agreed to participate in the project by sharing his contemporaneous written notes on the Palestinian male potters, and thereby became the co-author of the book. Rye visited Palestine in 1973, 1974, and 1977 to study the work of the male potters and during those seasons Landgraf and Rye worked together. This volume presents the field studies of both: in the first half, Landgraf’s studies of the women potters, and in the second half Rye’s studies of the male potters. Both groups made utilitarian vessels but were distinct from one another.

John Landgraf, after earning a PhD in molecular biology, entered the field of Palestinian archaeology when preparing a dissertation on the Late Bronze Age pottery of Tell Taanach (Ti‘inik) on the West Bank. In 1970, he visited Franken’s and Kalsbeek’s ceramology institute in Leiden, Netherlands. There he became acquainted with the various pottery-building techniques and with the relation between archaeology and ethnography. Owen Rye also came into Palestinian archaeology through the excavations at Tell Taanach. There, together with archaeologist Albert Glock, he attempted to establish correlations between the excavated ancient pottery and the modern traditional potters’ craft and commerce.

In their common introduction to the book, Landgraf and Rye address the impact of their ethnographic approach and the meaning of “tradition.” In the course of time, they had realized the profound differences between the traditional pottery made by women and that made by men. The women made pottery by hand, in the villages, according to need – vessels for food preparation and consumption and for water storage – in the period between the spring and the autumn harvests. The men made pottery on the wheel and had a wide repertoire, in or near towns in a year-round, commercial industry.

In the first part of the book, Landgraf opens his contribution by investigating the “End of a Tradition: Palestine’s Women Potters,” starting with the origin of both traditions and concluding that they have existed side by side since at least the Mamluk period (ca. 1250–1517 CE). He continues with a survey of the consecutive phases of the pot-making process: from collecting and preparing the clay and temper, to the stages of building pots, and finally the firing of the pots. It is made clear that all of these phases are interrelated: there is a coherence between the clay, the kind of temper used, the wall thickness, the end product, and the firing process.

The two types of vessels most produced by women were water storage jars and cooking pots. Cooking pots were distinctive because of the temperature resistance needed, as cooking was done over an open fire, so their formation required the use of

calcite temper, a raw material mainly found in the area of al-Jib.¹ For water jars, usually grog and crushed straw were used as the temper, both ingredients being widely available.

In the main part of Landgraf's contribution, the various elements of his introduction and survey are described in detail in his overview of the craft, titled "Women Potters in Ten West Bank Villages." Here history, ethnography, and ceramic techniques are discussed, in addition to some discussion of geology and trade. The villages reviewed are grouped by region: in the southern Dura district (Fuqayqis and Bayt 'Awwa); the central regions between Jerusalem and Nablus (Bayt 'Anan, al-Jib, Baytuniya, Sinjil, Qusra, Qabalan); and the area north of Nablus (Kafr al-Labad and Ya'bad).

The historical information covers the introduction of modern equipment during the twentieth century, which profoundly changed the set of household goods that were needed. The ethnographic information demonstrates the division of work between women and men, and between women potters and their women clients, including the use of house and yard. In addition to meticulously measuring and documenting the material preparations, pot building stages, and firing stages of these potters, Landgraf describes the finishing of the vessels, for example, the relation of painted pottery decoration to the embroidery patterns on Palestinian dresses in the Ramallah area. He also offers "cameo" portraits of several potters with whom he became personally acquainted in the course of repeated visits to their villages.

In the second part of the book, Owen Rye opens his contribution by investigating the "Survival of a Tradition: Palestine's Male Potters," starting with the concepts of tradition and workshop. Here the work location, availability of materials, pot building on the wheel, and scope of the end products, in addition to the types of fuel and firing processes, and the marketing of pots, differ profoundly from the women's pottery craft. Specific to Palestine is the Tijlis technique, that is, pot throwing on the wheel in two stages: first throwing the base closed upside down, and letting it dry, followed by turning the pot right side up, placing it in a chuck on the wheel, and finishing the upper half of the pot. Open pot forms, like bowls, are made right side up in one stage. The construction of the traditional Palestinian wheel, and the layout and use of the tower-like Palestinian *tabun* oven, are also discussed broadly.

In the main part of Rye's contribution, the various elements of his introduction and survey are described in detail in his overview titled, "Male Potters at Eight Centers in Palestine." The centers discussed are grouped in the central area of Ramallah, including al-Ramla, Jericho, and Jordan; the western area of 'Irtah; the northern area of Jaba'; and the large production centers of Hebron and Gaza. Here the historical developments of demarcation and migration after the 1948 and 1967 wars are taken into account. Therefore the "central area" is extended, and the potters' workshops still existing in 1977 in Nazareth, Haifa, and 'Akka (Acre) are also considered.

In Jaba', the limited group of potters produced utilitarian vessels of the usual Palestinian repertoire comparable to those produced at Hebron and Gaza. As special items the multiple-spouted wedding jar, the "duck"-like jug, and the candlestick with five candle holders may be mentioned.

The pottery craft in Hebron and Gaza is extensively reviewed, since in the 1970s

the number of workshops in these two centers far exceeded the number of workshops in other centers: ten in Hebron and fourteen in Gaza, based also on information drawn from the memories of informants reaching back to the 1930s.

Of these two centers, Hebron witnessed several changes during the twentieth century. Whereas before 1948 the full repertoire of Palestinian pottery types was still being produced in this city, later several types went out of use and ceased production because of the import of metal, plastic, and glass containers. For fuel, the traditionally used agricultural waste and wood were replaced by rubber. For temper, sand and salt came into use, which shortened firing times, enabled the addition of white-fired ware to the repertoire, and resulted in glazed ware falling out of the repertoire. In the mid-1960s, some potters changed from making utilitarian vessels to the production of miniature vessels and replicas of antiques, and began to work with electric ovens. After 1967, a market for flowerpots opened in Israel; a press was then introduced to produce flowerpots.

In Gaza over the past century, the number of workshops diminished drastically – from fifty workshops in 1907 to five in 2013, although Gaza workshops were still producing the full traditional repertoire of Palestinian pottery as late as 1977. Most workshops produced only black-fired ware (and reportedly had done so since the eighteenth century), while others also made red- or white-fired ware. Their fuel source was mainly waste from the furniture industry. Except in the case of white ware, no sand was incorporated into the temper, which made the firing process take longer. The ovens all differed in their measurements, with different rates of heating and different maximum temperatures. Half of the production was sold in the Gaza market; the flowerpots went to Israel, and the remainder to the West Bank market. White-fired ware was produced only in limited quantities, with salt being added to the clay.

In his descriptions, Rye provides overviews of the clays and the fuels needed and their costs, as well as calculations of the loss of waste pottery and of the final yield per firing session. He and Landgraf also provide a list of the Gaza pottery forms produced in 1975.

The five appendixes – lists of toponyms, numbers of potters' workshops by location, potters' names by location, a glossary of technical terms, and Palestinian census figures for 1967 and 1997 – along with over 550 photographs and diagrams, and the text they illustrate, altogether make this book a treasure for the study of Palestinian traditional pottery and culture in the twentieth century.

Karel Vriezen holds a PhD in archaeology from Leiden University and has served as assistant director of the German Evangelical Institute in Jerusalem (1972–75), and senior lecturer in the Department of Old Testament Studies, Utrecht University (1975–2005). He was co-director of archaeological excavations at the Muristan, in the Old City of Jerusalem (1972–74), and at Umm Qays (1974–97) and Tal Zar'a (Zira'a), in Jordan (2001–2).

Endnotes

1 Due to transliteration differences, place names mentioned in this review appear differently in the book under review, namely:

Fuqeiqis, Beit 'Awwa, Beit 'Anan, al Jib, Beitunia, Kafr al Labad, al Ramla, and Akka.