Mesopotamian ceramics from the burial mounds of Bahrain, c.2250–1750 BC

Among the ceramic vessels recovered from the burial mounds of Bahrain, a small percentage represents Mesopotamian imports or local emulations of such. In this paper two overall horizons are distinguished in these Mesopotamian ceramics. These are significant because both coincide with major stages in Mesopotamia’s interaction with the populations of the ‘Lower Sea’. The first import horizon is comprised of a vessel type found exclusively in the scattered mounds of Early Type which pre-date the rise of the Dilmun ‘state’ proper. The distribution of these vessels outside their areas of production demonstrates how they circulated widely in a network elsewhere considered to reflect the orbit of Mesopotamia’s late third-millennium ‘Magan trade’. Here it is consequently concluded that this particular type represents an important fossile directeur of the ‘Magan trade’ and pre-Dilmun florescence. The vessels that make up the subsequent horizon of Mesopotamian imports are found exclusively in the compact mound cemeteries and thus coincide with the heyday of Dilmun. On these grounds it is argued that the two horizons are the product of, respectively, the Ur III network of ‘Magan trade’ and the contracted Isin-Larsa network of ‘Dilmun trade’.

Keywords: Magan trade, Third Dynasty of Ur, Dilmun, Tilmun, Bahrain, trade, burial mounds, Early Dilmun

Introduction
The present article is the second of a pair of ceramics studies, the first of which is entitled ‘The decline of Magan and the rise of Dilmun: Umm an-Nar ceramics from the burial mounds of Bahrain, c.2250–2000 BC’ (Laursen 2009). The latter was written to shed new light on ‘Dilmun’s’ eastward contact with ‘Magan’ on the basis of pottery from the Umm an-Nar culture. This second article seeks to investigate some of the same aspects but from the opposite end of the ‘Dilmun orbit’ — namely by exploring her north-westward relations through the ceramics imported from South Mesopotamia. Both studies are designed to improve the archaeological understanding of the chronological relation between changes in Dilmun’s position in the Gulf trade and those major changes in the burial custom in Bahrain that followed the emergence of a Dilmun state proper.

From stratified deposits at Qala’at al-Bahrain — the ‘capital of Dilmun’ — it has been demonstrated that Mesopotamian pottery imports were relatively popular in period Ia (Akkadian), Ib (Late Akkadian–early Ur III) and Iia (Late Ur III) (10%, 19% and 6%),2 only to become much less frequent in periods IIb (Isin-Larsa) and IIc (Old Babylonian) (0.8% and 0.4%) (Højlund 1994: fig. 390).

A considerable but not quantified amount of South Mesopotamian pottery has also been uncovered as grave-goods in the Early Dilmun burial mounds. The situation in the mounds is different from that of Qala’at al-Bahrain and instructive in its own right because, although the range of

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1 I would like to thank Dr Flemming Højlund for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this manuscript.

2 Højlund has argued that since the numbers are based on counts of rim sherds, this introduces a bias in the record; therefore the actual percentages of Mesopotamian vessels in periods Ia and Ib are more likely to be as high as 18% and 31% (1994: 130).
Mesopotamian types is narrower in the tombs, the imports are often available in their complete state. This material is also of interest because the gradual substitution of imported types allows a correlation between the major changes in the Early Dilmun burial custom and Dilmun interactions with southern Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamian pottery from the burial mounds
The recorded collection originates in the excavations of the Bahrain National Museum in the area of present-day Hamad Town and comprises twenty-one more or less complete vessels (Table 1). The area from which the sample has been selected roughly corresponds to the map shown in Figure 6 (see below), but to date the re-identification of many of the more than 4000 mounds excavated in the area is still ongoing. The insecurities stem from the fact that one is principally dealing with a series of ill-coordinated but very large-scale rescue campaigns launched after the founding of the new city ‘Hamad Town’, which ran from 1980 to 2002. Collectively, the Hamad Town campaigns represent the largest archaeological operation undertaken in the Gulf and the main excavation site of burial mounds dating to the Early Dilmun period (2300–1700 BC).

In the collection of the Bahrain National Museum sherds and very fragmented vessels have for many years been inaccessible for study. Consequently, it is to be expected that the present collection of twenty-one vessels could be biased by an under-representation of fragile vessel types.

The vessels were included in the sample either because they can be identified immediately as Mesopotamian imports or because they appear to represent local imitations of such vessel types. The collection has been divided into five types on the basis of morphological variation.

Type definitions
Type 1 (Figs 1/1–11, 2/1–11)
This type is represented by eleven wheel-made vessels ranging in height from 10 to 20 cm (ave. 13 cm) and displaying maximum diameters ranging between 9.1 and 10.2 cm. They are commonly decorated with incised, impressed or painted motifs. The vessels can be divided into three subtypes, some of which are also found in other Mesopotamian contexts. These are:

Table 1. The near-complete Mesopotamian vessels found in the Hamad Town area. Recorded from the collection in store in the Bahrain National Museum collection and fragmented ones mentioned in reports. The BBM number (Bahrain Burial Mound in GIS) has been listed in those cases where the vessel can be linked to a specific mound in the Geographic Information System of the Bahrain Burial Mounds project.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A number</th>
<th>Illustration</th>
<th>Bahrain Burial Mound no. (BBM no)</th>
<th>Season(s)</th>
<th>Area/site</th>
<th>Mound no.</th>
<th>Chamber</th>
<th>‘Mesopotamia’ Type (temp)</th>
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<tr>
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<td>7</td>
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<tr>
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<td>20886</td>
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<td>461</td>
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<td>855</td>
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<td>14617</td>
<td>1999–00</td>
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MESOPOTAMIAN CERAMICS FROM THE BURIAL MOUNDS OF BAHRAIN
15.2 cm (ave. 10.9 cm). Typically the vessel body is distinctly heart-shaped with a base that terminates in a point. The neck is cylindrical to concave and ends in a moderately to sharply ledged shoulder. The rim, which typically represents the largest diameter of the vessel, is flaring and usually has a characteristic double or triple rib. In the vessels with double rib the rim is horizontally protruding in a sharp triangular profile (Fig. 1/1–4, 8–9, 11, Fig. 2/1–4, 8–9), whereas the rim on the triple-rib vessels is rounded and similar to the two lower ribs (Fig. 1/5–6, 10, Fig. 2/5–6). The type appears in a small and a large edition. The smaller vessels (Fig. 1/1–6, 10–11, Fig. 2/1–6) are remarkably homogeneous in size, with heights and rim diameters that range from 12.2 to 10 cm and 10.7 to 9.2 cm. Two larger vessels are 20.2 to 15.6 cm high. The largest of these (Figs 1/8, 2/8) is morphologically identical to the smaller vessels with double rim, whereas the other represents a rounded base variant (Figs 1/9, 2/9).

The vessels of Type 1 can generally be ascribed to two different wares, the most common of which is light red-brown to creamy white in colour occasionally with a slight greenish tone. This ware has a chalky feel with sand and possible fine straw tempering. The other ware is more hard fired and distinguished from the first by its greenish colour and glossy vitrified surface suggesting a difference in firing. The paste of the two wares appears to have been similar but with a possible absence of vegetal temper in the paste of the hard-fired vessels. All vessels show traces of a cream slip and two also exhibit faint traces of red paint (Fig. 1/1, 3).

Another small vessel undoubtedly also of Mesopotamian origin (Figs 1/7, 2/7), which does not formally correspond to the above-mentioned criteria but which appears to be functionally and chronologically similar to vessels of Type 1, has been included for convenience. In addition to the ones illustrated in this paper another vessel of Type 1 (not illustrated) was reportedly found together
with the two vessels (Fig. 1/1–2, Fig. 2/1–2) in the same burial chamber (Lowe 1986: 79).

Functionally, the narrow neck and multiple ribs found on Type 1 seem to have been purposely added to accommodate the secure fastening of some type of lid cover of a perishable material in combination with either a piece of cloth or leather and a strap. The rim of Type 1 is identical to Hejlund’s rim type M11 from Qala’at al-Bahrain (1994: 105, figs 257–261) and to McMahon’s rim type C-13 from Nippur (2006: pl. 106).

Type 2 (Figs 3/1–3, 4/1–3, 10)
This type is represented by four wheel-made vessels that, even if somewhat dissimilar, share some rough overall similarities. The vessels all exhibit a sharply ledged shoulder and more or less cylindrical neck but the rim and body shapes show variations. One vessel was not available for drawing (for photograph see Fig. 4/10) and another is undoubtedly a Bahraini imitation, possibly of a Mesopotamian model made of the characteristic local paste with inclusions of white grits and ochre incrustations often used for funerary vessels (Figs 3/3, 4/3). The vessel body ranges from cylindrical to slightly sagging with a rounded base. The shoulder has a sharp ledge that continues into a more or less cylindrical neck with a variety of protruding rims. The possible imitation in local ware (Figs 3/3, 4/3) has a more squat body and has its widest point located just below the shoulder ledge.

Type 3 (Figs 3/4, 4/4)
Type 3 is represented by a 17 cm-high wheel-made canister of a light orange ware with surface scrapings and lines after production on a potter’s wheel. It has a high and wide shoulder, short neck and slightly protruding triangular rim. The vessel narrows in at the base, which is marked by a small ring-base. There is a lump of bitumen sticking to the bottom of the vessel, seemingly associated with the repair of a small fracture.
Type 4 (Figs 3/5, 4/5)
Type 4 is represented by a wheel-made bowl with a diameter of 18 cm. The bowl, which is very irregular, has a vertically upturned and everted rim which, in combination with a marked shoulder, creates a concave groove between the shoulder and the rim. The base is asymmetrical and appears to have been string-cut while spinning on a fast turning wheel. The ware is light cream with a chalky feel with sand and fine straw tempering. Fragments of similar bowls are well known from Qala’at al-Bahrain (Type M15) (Højlund 1994: 106, figs 266–268).

Type 5 (Figs 3/6–9, 4/7–10)
This type is represented by four wheel-made vessels with cylindrical (and one sack-shaped) bodies. The vessels have a sharp shoulder with a short ledge and a short concave neck that terminates in a much everted rim. Surprisingly, the rim does not directly compare to any types from Qala’at al-Bahrain. The ware is orange to red-brown with a cream-brown to cream-orange slip that is burnished on one vessel (Figs 3/7, 3/8).

One vessel is morphologically similar to Type 5 (Figs 3/9, 4/9) but is distinguished by an attached ring-stand and darker surface colour. This vessel, of light brown ware with characteristic exploding white grits covered with a coarse brown-grey slip, appears to be a local imitation of a Mesopotamian model. A similar local vessel with ring stand, also of brown ware with white grits and darkened surface is known from the Aali cemetery (Mackay 1929: pl. VIII/12; Reade & Burleigh 1978: 82, pl. 34a, back row, left). Vessels identical to Figure 3/7–8 have been published in much higher numbers from the Aali cemetery (Mackay 1929: pl. VIII/6, 8, 16; Reade & Burleigh 1978: 82, pl.
Chronology of Mesopotamian imports and imitations

Even if present knowledge of the ceramic development in late third- and early second-millennium BC Mesopotamia leaves much to be desired, the existing chronology offers some important overall dating categories for the vessels discovered in the burial mounds of Bahrain. The local ‘Early Dilmun’ chronology developed from ceramics found in stratified contexts at Qala’at al-Bahrain (Højlund 1994) is equally of relevance. Some valuable information can also be derived from various sites in the Arabian Gulf where imported Mesopotamian vessels have been discovered.

Type 1

Type 1 is the most informative Mesopotamian import found in Bahrain. To the present author’s knowledge there is currently no evidence from Mesopotamia to suggest that the variation between two and three ribs is chronologically related. It is interesting to our case from Bahrain that while vessels similar to Type 1 in Mesopotamia are found in settlement contexts, they also frequently appear in graves. At Umm el-Jir, three complete vessels of Type 1 with the characteristic pointy base were found together in Level 5, Floor 4, which marks the transition to Ur III (Gibson 1972a: figs 5, 42/j). The vessels (1972a: nos. 10, 11 and 55) from Umm el-Jir are, respectively, of buff ware with cream slip, fine red ware with cream slip and red ware with red

3 The present author has made additional cursory examinations of the material from this cemetery in store at the Bahrain National Museum, which have revealed that an equally high number of the type remains unpublished.
slip and darker red wash. The latter is interesting because its red surface colour is paralleled in a couple of the vessels found in Bahrain (see above). Type 1 also appears at Nippur (McCown & Haines 1967: pl. 80/18) where the type (McMahon’s C-13) appears in levels XVII to VI, corresponding to the Akkadian period through to the Ur III/Isin-Larsa transition (McMahon 2006: pl. 120, table 56). The Type also appear at Kish (Gibson 1972b: fig. 34/G); Isin (Hrouda 1977: Tafel 27/IB 264, 276a); Uruk (Van Ess 1988: Abb. 12/102; Boehmer, Pedde & Salje 1995: tables 5/a, 9/c, 16/b, 17/e); Ur (Woolley 1934: pl. 254, type 44a; Pollock 1985: fig. 2); Eshnunna (Delougaz 1952: pl. 160/B.556.540, pl. 163/B.645.540a); Girsu (Genouillac 1936: pls 30/3769, 33/606, 31/2403); and in Iran at Susa (Gasche 1973: pl. 16, group 15b). The evidence from these sites for dating the vessel type is of varying quality but concentrates on a late Akkadian to Ur III time frame (c.2250–2000 BC). The globular variant of Type 1 (Figs 1/9, 2/9) possibly represents a late development of the pointy-based type for which parallels can be found at e.g. the Royal Cemetery of Ur (Woolley 1934: pl. 253, type 44b).

From Bahrain the round-based variant is also known from the Aali cemetery where it was discovered in Mackay’s mound no. 18 (Mackay 1929: pl. VII/15). Six rim fragments corresponding to those found on Type 1 vessels have been recovered from Qala’at al-Bahrain (Højlund 1994: 105). The diameter of the rims (Type M11) found at Qala’at al-Bahrain varies from 11 to 14 cm and thus falls perfectly within the 9.2–14.5 cm range of the rims of the smaller category of Type 1 vessels, and suggests that the fragments derive from vessels of identical size. At Qala’at al-Bahrain the type, with a single earlier exception, is exclusively found in period Ib (c.2100–2050 BC/early Ur III).

From Tarut Island, also within the Dilmun sphere, come three vessels of Type 1 (Fig. 5/2–4). They originate from chance discoveries by gardeners at the site of Al-Rufai’a but their complete state and that of other objects from the site suggest they derive from burials (Burkholder 1984: no. 30; Zarins 1989: fig. 6/22–24).

Two- and three-rib rim sherd s corresponding to Type 1 vessels (Fig. 5/5–7) have been recovered from Tell F6 on Failaka Island, in Kuwait. The rim with two ribs (Fig. 5/7) was found during the 1984–88 French excavations in Level Ve, Locus 340 (Pic 2008: 109, fig. 15/75), which the excavators date to the Ur III period (2008: 64). Two additional rims corresponding to Type 1 vessels of the
three-rib variant (Fig. 5/5–6) were found in stratified context during the Kuwait-Danish excavations in 2009 at Tell F6 (personal communication, Flemming Højlund). These rims came from the lowest level of the tell, which according to Højlund belong to a Mesopotamian Ur III occupation horizon that pre-dates the establishment of the Dilmun colony and its monumental buildings on the Island (Højlund 2010).

Vessels equivalent to those of Type 1 have also been reported from no less than five sites on the Oman peninsula. Hence, a rim fragment (Fig. 5/8) that corresponds in diameter to the largest vessel of Type 1 from Bahrain (Figs 1/8, 2/8) was recovered in a late third-millennium context at Tell Abraq (Potts 1990: 94, fig. 115). Fragments of one or more vessels (Fig. 5/9) fully compatible in shape and size to Type 1 have also been recovered in the large Umm an-Nar tomb Unar-2 (Carter 2002: fig. 4/109). Although this tomb must have been constructed around 2400 BC it also produced a Dilmun burial jar with scored rim (2002: figs 4, 6) of the earliest

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4 I am grateful to Dr Højlund for sharing this information with me.
sub-type (Laursen 2010: 124–126, fig. 11/1–8). This early sub-type of the Dilmun burial jar has on various grounds been dated to the later half of Qala’at al-Bahrain period IIa (c.2025–2000 BC/late Ur III) (2010: 132) testifying to the fact that the Unar-2 tomb was still open to internments at that time. Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests a date before 2000 BC of the Type 1 vessel at Unar-2 (Carter 2002). A comparable date can also be deduced from a Type 1 fragment (Fig. 5/10) found in a circular Umm an-Nar tomb excavated by Carl Phillips at Munayi near Kalba (Phillips 1997: fig. 2/1).5 In addition to this fragment, a vessel corresponding to Type 1 (Fig. 5/11) has been recovered at the site of Kalba 4 (personal communication, Carl Phillips).6

Finally, a small Type 1 pot (Fig. 5/1) recovered from the pit-grave Hili Tomb N (Al-Tikriti & Méry 2000) is of particular interest to the present analysis because its context is well suited for defining the chronology of the type. The Hili vessel was found in the very top of the terminal Layer IV of the pit-grave and must consequently have been associated with one of the very last interments in the tomb. The tomb was sealed with a stone pavement after which it was abandoned.14C dates of three bone and one charcoal sample are available from the top of this terminal layer and places the abandonment of the grave at the very end of the third millennium BC (McSweeney, Méry & Macchiarelli 2008: table 1). The fact that the Type 1 vessel came from the very top of the layer thus renders it a likely contemporary with the middle of the Third Dynasty of Ur.

Type 2

There is poor evidence from Mesopotamia for dating the vessels of Type 2, which form a rather heterogeneous group. The vessels in Figures 3/1–2 and 4/1–2 are not easily matched with published ceramics but have some similarity with vessels from Girsu (Genouillac 1936: pl. 30/2242) and another from Uruk that are broadly dated to the Ur III-Old Babylonian period (Van Ess 1988: Abb. 3/2), and in a vessel from Nippur thought to be of Akkadian date (McCown & Haines 1967: pl. 84/1). The vessel in Figure 4/10, which could be argued to constitute a loose typological link between Type 2 and Type 5, has almost exact parallels from Eshnunna (Delougaz 1952: pl. 119/f) and Susa (Gashe 1973: pl. 17/3), both of which date to the Isin-Larsa period (c.2000–1750 BC). The imitation in local ware (Figs 3/3, 4/3) has no parallels in Bahrain but is broadly similar to the above-mentioned parallels from Mesopotamia.

Type 3

This canister (Figs 3/4, 4/4) finds comparison in a vessel from Eshnunna of Isin-Larsa date (Delougaz 1952: pl. 121/a) and resemblance in a vessel found in Uruk (Grab 13a), dated to Neusumerische Zeit (Boehmer, Pedde & Salje 1995: table 9/d).

Type 4

The Type 4 bowl (Figs 3/5, 4/5) finds close parallels in Mesopotamia in a type that reached immense popularity from the Akkadian throughout the Isin-Larsa periods (McCown & Haines 1967: pl. 82/19–20). Similar bowls from Qala’at al-Bahrain (M15) appear almost exclusively in the period Ib deposits (c.2100–2050 BC/early Ur III) (Hojlund 1994: fig. 388).

Type 5

Type 5 has an excellent parallel from the Royal cemetery of Ur in pottery type 40 (Woolley 1934: pl. 253: 40) which Woolley (erroneously?) ascribed to the Akkadian period (1934: 513). It is also known from Girsu where it dates to Isin-Larsa (Genouillac 1936: pl. 31/1359). The local vessel with ring stand (Figs 3/9, 4/9) imitates a Mesopotamian incised grey ware type with white inlays that was very popular during the Isin-Larsa period, e.g. at Uruk (Van Ess 1988: fig. 226) and Tell Asmar (Delougaz 1952: pls 123–125). The imitation goes as far as to copy the characteristic dark surface colour of the Mesopotamian grey ware model — a feature that is also observable on the compatible vessel found by Mackay in Aali.

In conclusion, as regards the chronological issues it appears that Type 1 is restricted to the late Akkadian to Ur III period in South and Central Mesopotamia. At Qala’at al-Bahrain the type is present in the period Ib layers roughly compatible with the early half of the Third Dynasty of Ur, but absent in period Ia believed to be synchronous with the Akkadian period. At Failaka Tell F6 the type’s presence in the late third-millennium ‘Mesopotamian’ horizon described by Hojlund further demonstrates that its circulation here pre-dates the ‘Dilmunite’ colonisation of the island. On the Oman peninsula the type is present in late Umm an-Nar settlements and grave

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5 I thank Dr Rob Carter for drawing my attention to this rim fragment.
6 I am grateful to Dr Carl Phillips and Dr Dan Eddisford for sharing this information with me.
deposits dating to the very end of the third millennium. The $^{14}C$ dated top layer of the pit-grave Hili tomb N provides a link between Type 1 and the absolute chronology. As shall be discussed below, this fits perfectly with the evidence from Bahrain where the disappearance of Type 1 in the burial mounds can be intimately connected to the

Fig. 7. An unusually large mound of Early Type with a large and extraordinary H-shaped chamber mentioned by Lowe (1986: 76). The location of the Type 1 vessel in the north-western alcove is indicated by an arrow (Mound no. 77, Area B-North (BN), season 1982–83). This mound has been designated BBM no. 32635 in the Bahrain Burial Mound projects database. (Drawings courtesy of the Bahrain National Museum.)
emergence of the mound cemeteries from around 2050 BC. In Bahrain, the dating range of Type 1 can accordingly be established to c.2200–2050 BC even if the type (at least the rim technology) appeared slightly earlier in Mesopotamia.

The chronology of Types 2 and 3 is poorly accounted for in Mesopotamia but broadly places them in the Ur III to Old Babylonian time span. The fact that bowls compatible to our Type 4 cluster at Qala‘at al-Bahrain in period Ib deposits renders an Ur III date (c.2100–2000 BC) most likely for the bowl in question, even if the duration of the type was somewhat longer in Mesopotamia. Although the mix of vessels described under Type 5 is poorly dated in Mesopotamia it can roughly be ascribed to the Isin-Larsa period.

Spatial distribution of Mesopotamian imports
Essentially, the scattered mound found outside the compact mound cemeteries Buri and Karzakkan all belong to a so-called Early Type (c.2250–2050 BC), while the burial mounds found within the dense clusters of these two cemeteries are all of the so-called Late Type (c.2050–1800 BC) (Fig. 6). The two types are physically different and primarily dated on the grounds of domestic and imported pottery and seals found in the chambers. In terms of social organisation the emergence of the mound cemeteries has been intimately linked to the formation of the Dilmun state proper (Højlund 1989; 2007; Laursen 2008; 2010).

Against the backdrop of the burial mound distribution it can be observed that the Mesopotamian vessel types have a vague tendency to cluster and this spatial patterning can be correlated with the chronology of the types. Consequently, the evidence suggests that changes in the Mesopotamian imports became expressed as ‘horizontal stratigraphy’ through the distribution of the vessel types as the burial mounds accumulated over time.

In respect of the Late Akkadian and Ur III vessels of Type 1 it is evident that their distribution is restricted to an area stretching from the eastern edge of the Buri cemetery down to the borders of the Karzakkan cemetery. This area is synonymous with the distribution of Early Type mounds. Importantly Type 1 is consistently found in the chambers of Early Type mounds, the only exception being the globular variant (Figs 1/9, 2/9) that comes from a transitory so-called Radial Wall Type mound (Lowe 1986: fig. 6; Laursen 2010: 129, figs 15–16). Below we shall look into the wider significance of this vessel type and argue that it represents an important fossile directeur which can be intimately linked to the heyday of Mesopotamia’s late third-millennium ‘Magan’ trade.

In respect of the vessels of Types 2 to 5 it is significant that they have all been found within the compact Karzakkan cemetery. The fact that all three examples of Type 5 are found along the western facade of the cemetery suggests that they represent the latest imports, but otherwise the small sample size prevents further inferences. As the chronological evidence implied, the Types 2–5 vessels largely date to the Isin-Larsa period possibly with exceptions extending into the late Ur III (Type 4) and the Old Babylonian periods (Type 5).

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7 It should be noted that the Type 1 vessels found along the eastern edge of the Buri cemetery derive from a cluster of Early Type mounds that only later were encroached by Late Type mounds and thus clearly pre-date the Late Type burial mounds which formed the compact cemetery.
The first horizon — the ‘Magan’ trade
In the above-mentioned article (Laursen 2009) of which this paper is a sequel, it was demonstrated that imports of late Umm an-Nar Black-on-Red pottery almost exclusively appear in the scattered mounds of Early Type only to disappear completely with the emergence of compact mound cemeteries (2009: fig. 10). In the same article this distribution was taken to reflect fundamental changes in the relationship between Dilmun and Magan occurring synchronously with the emergence of compact mound cemeteries. Principally, the disappearance of Umm an-Nar Black-on-Red was argued to represent the mercantile decline of Magan and the consequent demise of the Umm an-Nar culture.

This conclusion is of interest in relation to the Mesopotamian imports discussed in the present study because the distribution exhibited by the vessels of Type 1 (Fig. 6) is an exact match of the one observed for the Umm an-Nar pottery. Based on the corresponding distributions it would appear reasonable to infer that the first ‘horizon’ of Mesopotamian imports was synchronous with the influx of pottery from the Umm an-Nar culture into Bahrain.8

The evidence suggests that the small and sophisticated Type 1 vessel was only afforded by those who had enjoyed a relatively prominent rank in life. As noted by Lowe, one of these vessels was found in a large Early Type mound (Rifa’a mound), which had a very unusual H-shaped chamber of considerable dimensions (1986: 76) (Fig. 7). Without any further comparison it should be noted that the uncommon H-shaped chambers continued as the standard in the largest ‘aristocratic’ mounds often as the lower chamber in two-tiered constructions with a shaft entrance, and in many of the ‘Royal’ mounds of Aali (Mackay 1929; Højlund 2007: fig. 91). Lowe further mentions that three vessels of the type were found in a large Early Type mound with a T-shaped chamber (1986: 79).9 In both cases the large chamber size and multiple alcoves together with large mound diameters suggest that the interred individuals were of high rank in late third-millennium Dilmun society.

The apparent exclusivity associated with Type 1 raises questions about the intrinsic and symbolic value of this particular vessel as well as the substance it originally contained. As previously mentioned, the vessels found in the burial mounds (esp. Fig. 1/1–6, 10–11) are strikingly homogeneous in terms of both shape and size. In order properly to appreciate the homogeneity of the collection that reached Bahrain, it should be noted that in southern Mesopotamia the vessels with rims equivalent to those on Type 1 also appear in a number of dissimilar shapes and sizes (Fig. 8). The fact that the distinctive rim technology (Nippur C-13) (McMahon 2006: pl. 106) was employed on a much wider range of functional types than those known from Bahrain clearly testifies to the highly selective nature of the extant collection — possibly a function of a morphological standardisation over time. Furthermore, the fact that all other vessels of Type 1 found in the Arabian Gulf (see Fig. 5) (in all those cases where the complete

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8 Taken as a whole, the evidence of the Mesopotamian vessels and the late Umm an-Nar Black-on-Red pottery raises some interesting questions about the nature of Dilmun’s cultural affiliations in the late third-millennium world. When accessing the small absolute number of Type 1 vessels, it should be recalled that the quantities of pottery recovered from the scattered Early Type mounds are generally much smaller than those unearthed from the Late Type mounds, and as a result the eleven ‘complete’ Type 1 vessels in reality make up a significant part of the early ceramic inventory. Most significant is the fact that in the Early Type mounds the ratio of Mesopotamian vessels to Umm an-Nar Black-on-red pottery is approximately 1:8. The number is based on the data presented in this paper, Laursen 2009 and pottery drawings kept at the Bahrain National Museum, i.e. fine ware of ‘Magan’ affinity occurs eight times more frequently as grave-goods than vessels of South Mesopotamian origin. In the contemporary settlement deposits at Qala’at al-Bahrain this picture is contrasted by the direct opposite ratio. Hence, in periods Ib and Ia, 19% and 6% of all rims sherds are classified as Mesopotamian while the percentages for Umm an-Nar only reach 2.8% and 0.4% (Højlund 1994: fig. 390).

The asymmetric occurrence of imported pottery can be explained by the dissimilar nature of the two contexts. It is apparent that among the Mesopotamian ceramics found at Qala’at al-Bahrain both the larger containers used to ship cargo to Dilmun as well as types that clearly functioned as tableware are represented. The wide adaptation of Mesopotamian tableware in the households of the central settlement at Qala’at al-Bahrain could be accounted for if one considers the circumstances that surrounded its adaptation. During a time of rising social complexity a new ‘class’ of more cosmopolitan Dilmunites must have emerged under the influence of, among others, the dining habits and sophisticated lifestyle of the metropolitan citizens of South Mesopotamia. However, large ceramic vessels used to carry bulk goods from South Mesopotamia probably did not convey this refined lifestyle and were perhaps for that reason excluded from the funerary assemblage. Conversely, a very uniform selection of luxurious Mesopotamian imports (Type 1 and possibly their intended content) accompanied late third-millennium Dilmunites in death.

9 According to the records this corresponds to Mound 148, area B-North East (BNE), season 1983–84, located on the western edge of the Buri cemetery. The mound has been designated BBM no. 35076 in the Bahrain Burial Mound projects database.
vessel profile can be determined) are of exactly the same shape as those from Bahrain, leaves the distinct impression that the contained export was standardised in terms of substance and volume. The general regularity in the shape of this ‘Gulf sample’ further suggests that the rims sherds of Type 1 vessels (Type M11) found at Qala’at al-Bahrain, which exhibit the same range of rim diameters (11–14 cm), can safely be attributed to the same restricted morphological category (Højlund 1994: 105, figs 257–261). This regularity should possibly be seen as a product of specialised potters affiliated to the temple and palace economies of the Ur III state (Steinkeller 1996; Wright 1998).

The evidence is significant because collectively it supports the assumption that all these vessels were designed to contain the same substance and its occasional long-distance shipment. Judging from the slim evidence, this substance appears to have been some luxury product of Mesopotamian manufacture dispatched in a fairly standardised quantity, which was desired by the population along the Arabian Gulf. Alternatively, one cannot reject outright the fact that the vessels were primarily desired in the Gulf due to some intrinsic value as exotic fine tableware.

From the distribution of Type 1 vessels down the Arabian Gulf it can be observed that these objects circulated in a network, the furthest extension of which lay at least a 1000 km beyond the urban centres of South Mesopotamia (Fig. 9). It is important to note that these vessels occur on sites such as Tarut, Qala’at al-Bahrain, Tell Abraq and Kalba, which are believed to have functioned as vital nodes in the network of the late third-millennium Gulf trade.

It has been documented that while the more or less regular dealings that existed during the Sagonic period with distant Meluhha in the Indus Valley ceased, right from the onset of the Ur III period Magan was established as an important supplier of copper to Mesopotamian merchants (Heimpel 1987). This status is clearly expressed by Ur-Namma (2113–2095 BC) who claims to have re-established the Magan trade during his reign, and by his contemporary Gudea (c.2100 BC) who, in his famous dedicatory inscriptions, proclaims that Magan provides Lagash with diorite for the carving of statues (Steinkeller, in press: 23).

Foreign trade of the Ur III period appears to have generally entailed large-scale enterprises orchestrated by
traders such as Pu’u’du who according to Steinkeller was of ‘exceedingly high standing’ and ran an institution equivalent to a modern foreign-trade ministry (2004: 104). Textural references dating to the Ur III period show that in Girsu the building of boats destined for the Magan route was placed in the hands of large and highly organised ‘dockyard’ institutions (Zarins 2008). A contemporary text discloses that the construction of a Magan boat in Girsu was a matter of such importance that its supervision was placed ‘under the ensi’ (Postgate 1992: 218).

The large scale of long-distance trade ventures in the Ur III period is also testified in the Ur temple accounts, which mention ships of an astonishing 300 gur (90,000 litres) capacity. The grand vessels of the Third Dynasty of Ur III are contrasted with the typical 40 gur (12,000 litres) capacity of boats known from the mercantile enterprises of the post-Ur III trade (Oppenheim 1954: n. 8; gur conversions in brackets after Postgate 1992: 218).

The contrast between the ‘Magan boats’ of Ur III and the succeeding ‘Dilmun boats’ is further underscored by the fact that, although apparently still seagoing, one of the latter is recorded to have had a capacity of merely 20 gur (6000 litres) (Vosmer 2008: 230). However, it is a distinct possibility that the appearance of ‘Dilmun ships’ of this ‘undersized’ hull capacity can simply be explained by the fact that they were only destined for Failaka Island which from this time (c.2000 BC) served a Dilmun northern outpost less than 200 nautical miles from the ancient Mesopotamian shoreline.

The second horizon — the ‘Dilmun’ trade
The date of the Types 2–5 vessels ranges from the end of the Ur III to the Old Babylonian period, which according to the cuneiform texts was the time when Dilmun’s interaction with Mesopotamia reached its all-time peak (Oppenheim 1954). It is therefore surprising that the quantity of Mesopotamian vessels in the second horizon is extraordinarily limited in relative comparison with the amounts of contemporary local pottery recovered from the Buri and Karzakkan cemeteries. Contrary to the previous ‘horizon’ this situation can, however, be paralleled in the low frequencies of Mesopotamian pottery (0.8% and 0.4%) at Qala’at al-Bahrain observed for the contemporary periods IbIIb and IIc (Isin-Larsa and Old Babylonian period) (Højlund 1994: 130, fig. 390).

The situation at Qala’at al-Bahrain must primarily be explained as changes in taste (in the broadest sense of the word) but it appears that differences in social status still introduced unequal access to exotic imports and their elusive but doubtless luxury contents in death. The observed frequencies in the burial mounds thus also reflect a situation where the generally lower social status of the population interred in the Buri and Karzakkan cemeteries resulted in more limited access to exotica than, for example, was the case for the clearly more high-ranking individuals entombed in the very large burial mounds near the ‘royal’ mounds in the Aali cemetery. That individuals interred in the Aali cemetery were accompanied by more Mesopotamian pottery is clearly demonstrated in the material from the Danish expedition’s excavation of large mounds in ‘Group A’ in 1961 (Højlund 2007: 67–93). Here the abundant presence of Mesopotamian pottery in the extraordinarily large chambers strongly indicates that the Aali ‘population’ had more ample access to Mesopotamian exotica than the lower-ranking ‘population’ represented at the more humble Buri and Karzakkan cemeteries. A similar pattern can be deduced from Mackay’s excavations of the ‘royal’ mounds in Aali where Mesopotamian pottery was encountered in disproportionally larger quantities than observed in the Karzakkan and Buri cemeteries (Mackay 1929). This general impression was reaffirmed by the author through an inspection of pottery from the Aali cemetery excavated by Bahraini archaeologists and stored at the Bahrain National Museum, which shows that vessels such as Type 5 were far more frequent here than at any of the ‘lower-ranking’ cemeteries, including Buri and Karzakkan.

Conclusion
The distribution of the first Mesopotamian ceramic imports horizon restricted to the burial mounds of Early Type consolidates the conclusions made previously (Larsen 2009). While this earlier study concentrated on Umm an-Nar pottery and established that the emergence of the mound cemeteries unfolded in the wake of the decline of Magan, the new evidence presented here allows us to improve our understanding of Dilmun by including its relations with South Mesopotamia. The Type 1 vessels are argued to be strong archaeological correlates of the long-distance ‘Magan’ trade of the Ur III state. Judging from the abrupt disappearance of Type 1 at the time of the emerging mound cemeteries, this major change in social organisation in Dilmun (and Magan) was paralleled by a reorganisation of South Mesopotamian trade. While one could characterise the position of Dilmun during the first imports horizon as that of an intermediary node in bipolar network
with Magan (and Melluha?) on the one hand and Mesopotamian on the other, this changed radically after the emergence of the mound cemeteries. The ceramics of the second imports horizon’s testimony of continued relations between Dilmun and South Mesopotamia during the period of the compact mound cemeteries and the heyday of Dilmun’s Gulf trade come as no surprise. However, with the fading of Type 1 vessels and Umm an-Nar pottery a wide range of foreign pottery appears in the mound cemeteries, including some ‘Kaffari-related’ ware presumably from the Fars province, Emir Grey vessels from the eastern borderlands, possibly the Bampur Valley, and a few vessels of possible Indus Valley origin (Laursen 2010: 129–132). To sum up, the archaeological evidence supports the assumption that a considerable expansion of the ‘markets’ and potential trade partners of Dilmun unfolded synchronously with the emergence of the compact mound cemeteries.

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