

Scaling up!

Setting Conditions and Structuring of Large-Scale Pottery Workshops in Diachronic and Transregional Perspective



Potters workshop around Al-Busayrah (Syria) in 1981 © Archives Dominique Orssaud

This **call for paper** is organised by **Johnny S. Baldi** and **Claire Padovani** (UMR 5133 - Archéorient), within the framework of the **Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR)-funded project FACT.WORK** – First proto-industrial ceramic FACTories in the 7th-2nd millennia BCE Mesopotamia and Levant. WORK organization from the proto-urban settlements to the supra-regional kingdoms (Projet ANR-22-CE27-0003) directed by J.S. Baldi.

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In archaeological research, large-scale pottery workshops are usually recognised through their extensive spatial footprint, dense concentration of production facilities and abundant pottery wastes. In linear models of economic development, such workshops are often associated with specialisation and standardisation of the production, enabled by advanced technologies and strong hierarchical control (Van der Leeuw 1977; Peacock 1982; Tosi 1984). Recent scholarships, however, have highlighted that these concepts are not necessarily co-dependent (Fragnoli, Frangipane 2021; Baldi 2025).

To explore the complexity and specificity of large-scale workshops, we propose to move **beyond product-centred interpretations**, by emphasising that production processes do not only generate material outputs; but also actively shape, reshape and reproduce **social relations** (Mauss 1968 ; Bourdieu 1980 ; Giddens 1984). From this perspective, the clustering and coordination of multiple producers within a single location stands out as a significant feature of large-scale workshops that requires closer analysis (Pentland, Feldman 2005).

Through highlighting the **conditions** that underlie the establishment of large-scale pottery workshops across diverse chronological and regional contexts, as well as their **spatial articulation** and **social organisation**, this special issue seeks to address **dynamics of production intensification** and the associated social transformations reflected in these workshops (Morrison 1994). Pottery production is a particularly suitable proxy to study these dynamics because it is a common good used for varied livelihood activities such as cooking, storing, exchanges and social gathering, and more sensitive to scaling changes than luxury items restricted to narrow social strata.

Pottery production has been poorly explored from spatial and relational perspectives (Duistermaat 2016; Erb-Satullo 2022; Padovani et al. 2025).

The location of pottery workshops has often been treated as a straightforward issue, commonly assumed to depend on proximity to clay sources and major communication routes (Dufaÿ 2001), optimisation of land and resources (Arnold 1985, 1993), and separation from residential areas due to the polluting effects of kiln emissions (Drüe 2024).

Even if these factors influence the location of pottery production, functionalist interpretations – grounded in an essentialist view of craftspeople as rational resource maximisers – limit the **agency of potters** (Nicklin 1979) and are rooted in contemporary capitalist models that cannot be uncritically applied to ancient societies, particularly in pre-state or weak-state contexts. As a result, the organisation of pottery production has long been treated as a largely homogeneous phenomenon across regions and periods, weakly diagnostic of socio-cultural differentiation.

The upscaling of production is understood as the **optimisation** and **expansion** of manufacturing capacity to answer the growth of a social group, a settlement, or an exchange network. It is not only a matter of size but rather a **reasoned choice** and a substantial transformation of the production organisation to efficiently answer an increasing demand (Shepherd, Patzelt 2022).

While the drivers of upscaling are necessarily **embedded in historical events** specific to each society and in particular economic contexts, the transhistorical and transdisciplinary scope of this special issue may allow for the identification of **recurring patterns** in the conditions and modalities of upscaling. This approach aims to assess whether upscaling practices are culturally specific or potentially follow general principles.

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This special issue seeks to examine the **conditions** under which large-scale pottery workshops are established across different regions and chronological contexts, as well as the **organisational forms** these workshops assume. Drawing on case studies mobilising archaeological, ethnographic, archaeometric, experimental, sensorial, geoscientific, paleoenvironmental, micromorphological and spatial analytical approaches, this special issue invites contributions that explore large-scale pottery production from the following perspectives (without being limited to them):

- Environmental, sensorial and socio-economic settings. The location of workshops near major demographic centres or commercial roads may facilitate access to labour and sustained demand, while proximity to clay deposits and fuel resources may reduce the time and cost of raw material procurement. Are specific environmental or socio-economic settings prerequisites for large-scale pottery workshop, or can such systems develop under a wider range of conditions? Hygienist explanations for locating workshops away from population centres should be treated with caution, since modern populations commonly choose to inhabit areas despite major pollution levels, probably far higher than ancient ones. However, was the perceptibility of production activities – such as the visibility or odours of kiln smokes, whether regarded as advantageous or inconvenient – also considered in the selection of workshop locations?

- Technical knowledge. Large-scale production is traditionally associated with complex technologies. To what extent does large-scale workshop require or stimulate technological transformations? Are particular stages of the pottery chaîne opératoire more affected by technical change than others to upscale production?

Under certain circumstances, some techniques may increase the tempo of production, reduce labour time, or optimise energy consumption. What are these techniques, and under what conditions do they emerge?

- Spatial structuring and labour organisation.

Does large-scale workshop involve larger production facilities, or rather a reconfiguration in the number of producers, installations, and production cycles? More broadly, does large-scale workshop require transformations in the spatial articulation and connectivity of their production units? While division of labour is often invoked as a key mechanism for increasing productivity (Childe 1934), alternative models based on labour integration and collaborative production may also play a significant role.

While the primary aim of this special issue is to assemble a diverse range of case studies from different chrono-cultural horizons, we also envisage a second phase of **collective reflection**. Following the publication of the special issue (cf. proposed workflow), contributors will be invited, if they wish, to participate in a workshop focused on the comparative analysis of these case studies. The goal of the workshop is to evaluate whether shared processes underlie different experiences of upscaling in pottery production, potentially revealing broader **patterns in human social dynamics**. This workshop will probably be organised during the 2027 symposium of the European Archaeologists Association (EAA) that will take place in Leiden, Netherlands.

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Workflow

Step/Calendar	Feb 26	Mar 26	Apr 26	May 26	Jun 26	Jul 26	Aug 26	Sep 26	Oct 26	Nov 26	Dec 26
Call for paper opening											
Abstract sending											
Paper writing											
Submission to Journal											

Step/Calendar	Dec 26	Jan 27	Feb 27	Mar 27	Apr 27	May 27	Jun 27	Jul 27	Aug 27	Sep 27
Double-blind peer review										
Revision										
Copyediting, Proofing										
Publishing										
Workshop (EAA 2027 - Leiden)										