A TALE OF TWO HOUSES: THE ROLE OF POTTERY IN RECONSTRUCTING HOUSEHOLD WEALTH AND COMPOSITION

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The opportunity to examine the complete contents of a building, preserved as is on the day of its sudden and violent destruction, is not particularly common in archaeological excavations, where successive occupation is generally uneventful and entails the periodic partial or complete depletion of the contents (La Motta and Schiffer 1999: 20–21). Such an opportunity arose at Tel Batash (biblical Timnah) in the Shephelah region of Israel, where excavations revealed a succession of four superimposed dwellings dated to the Late Bronze Age (henceforth LB), all of which met a violent end (Mazar 1997b: 41–69). The two earlier structures, dated to LBIA and early LBIB, respectively, were not entirely excavated. The two later houses (Figs. 1 and 2)—Building 475 of late LBIB (Stratum VIII) and Building 315 of LBIIA (Stratum VII)—were found complete with rich assemblages of restorable pottery and other finds. No subsequent house was built above the ruins of the later building and, for the most part, the buildings remained intact. These two later houses were subjected to a distributional analysis (Panitz-Cohen 2006a), which has provided a productive database with which various topics can be examined, including how the quantity and quality of the pottery can inform us about household wealth and composition.

A caveat to our ability to use this rich database to arrive at entirely accurate conclusions is related to the complex physical and cultural formation processes of the archaeological record (Schiffer 1996; David and Kramer 2001: 100). While the comprehensive ceramic data set afforded by these two buildings conforms to the description of “primary deposition” (LaMotta and Schiffer 1999: 21), for this study we kept in mind that the amount, distribution, and types of finds do not necessarily reflect a direct, one-to-one correlation with actual household activities or other characteristics, such as gender roles or economic status. What is represented is only a snapshot of the location of the contents of the houses at the time of their violent destruction.
Figure 1. Building 475.

Figure 2. Building 315.