



The Levantine Ceramics Project



www.levantineceramics.org

The Levantine Ceramics Project (LCP; www.levantineceramics.org) is a new model for communicating, linking, and expanding the use of archaeological data in order to advance research. The project comprises a public, crowd-sourced, custom-built web application along with periodic workshops and seminars. The LCP focuses on ceramics produced anywhere in the Levant, meaning the modern countries of Turkey, Syria, Cyprus, Lebanon, Israel, Jordan, and Egypt, anytime from the Neolithic era (c. 5500 B.C.E.) through the time of Ottoman rule (c. 1920 C.E.), although the model is scalable and transferable to other specialties beyond ceramics, and regions outside of the Levant.

On the LCP website, anybody may submit, search, and compare data on ceramic wares, petro-fabrics, shapes, types, scientific analyses, and kiln sites. All data is linked to contributor(s) and original publication(s). Information can be edited, removed, or re-arranged, making the LCP an archive and a research tool – a critical aspect since archaeology is predicated on new discoveries along with reconsideration of older material. To date 194 scholars from 21 countries have contributed to the LCP. The LCP puts diverse data and specialists side by side, and connects scholars to scholarship.

The Significance of the Levant – and of ceramics – for understanding history

As a corridor between east and west, north and south as well as the center of gravity for three world religions, the Levant has lured scholars since the 19th century. Excavations have revealed the places behind the stories: temples, palaces, cities, farmsteads, workshops, graveyards. But to animate these places we must follow a human path.

Pottery provides a trail because it makes human behavior visible. From the time of the first agricultural villages in the sixth millennium BCE through the early twentieth century people have used clay vessels to store, prepare, cook, and serve food; to hold perfume; to ship commodities; to burn oil for light; to contain or serve as votive offerings; to help settle the dead in a more comfortable afterlife. Via an array of analytical techniques, pottery also gives evidence for dating, production, and exchange. Of all material remains recovered by archaeologists, pottery is the most abundant. Seeing and understanding ceramics allows us to see and better understand the people who made and used them.

The Challenge – and the LCP solution

Archaeological research relies on two elements: the production of new data and its integration with material that has already been discovered. The traditional mode for bringing those two pieces together has been, and continues to be, print publication. But that mode binds researchers in a Catch-22: we continuously produce new data but sheer quantity and inflexible modes of dissemination often put it out of reach: buried in detailed site reports, fragmented by geography, obscured by specialized jargon. As a communicative device, publication is simply not a sufficiently pliable, robust platform

to foster communication, generate productive discussion, and display the most current understandings.

Digital initiatives are one obvious solution, and indeed there are several such initiatives focused on pottery. All, however, are built to be static repositories with individual gatekeepers. They enshrine what is known but do not function as active agents for scholarly work. We need tools that can accommodate new data and bring it into dialogue with older information, that foster the sharing of information, that are easy to access and use, that allow us to readily learn from each other, and that enable us to refine and correct information.

The LCP was built to be such a tool. It is a new type of public research website, a continually expanding open collaborative effort. The LCP is powered by a custom-built relational database developed specifically for archaeological ceramics. It is designed to make it easy to submit, search for, and combine data on fabrics, wares, shapes, contexts, scientific analyses, kiln sites, and chronology, both published and newly discovered. Credibility and intellectual property is maintained by a feature that links and displays the specific contributor(s) for all information. Since launching in Spring 2011, the LCP's easy-to-use application has attracted an expanding international research community: from an initial user group of 29 contributors, today the LCP has 194 contributors from over 20 countries. It is a sustainable, expandable system that allows diverse specialists to connect with quantities of disparate information and with each other.

In 2016, the LCP began an official collaboration with the Israel Antiquities Authority, under the direction of Gideon Avni, the IAA's director of excavations and surveys. In this agreement, IAA researchers will meet regularly to review ongoing projects, choose material to submit to the LCP, and underwrite one full year's worth of working days (in total) for researchers to submit information to the site. In addition, the group will review already published excavations, make recommendations for material to be uploaded to the LCP, and supply LCP interns with data and good quality digital illustrations to upload.

LCP Workshops

Since 2012 the LCP has held [11 workshops](#). Below I briefly describe the latest two: one in [Leuven](#), Belgium in March 2016, devoted to petrography and petro-fabrics; and a second, held in [Athens](#), Greece in July 2016, devoted to pottery of Egypt in the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine periods.

Leuven

The Leuven workshop was held in collaboration with the KU Leuven Department of Geology. Attending the workshop were almost all of the ceramic petrographers currently working in Israel. In advance of the workshop we had built a bulk upload tool that allowed them to add hundreds of thin-section descriptions and images at a time. By the time of the workshop, they had submitted over 5000 petrographic samples to the site, including both descriptions and photographs. This provided the essential data that made it possible to devise a systematic way to identify, group, and categorize petrographic information and to assign individual samples to a petro-fabric group. In Leuven participants successfully identified, named, defined, and described 25 new petro-fabrics covering all of Israel. Thanks to the LCP, for the first time, petrographers now have a system, a mode, and a resource that allows them to search for and identify petrographic samples by reference to others, to assign samples to petro-fabrics, and to easily communicate that information to others.

Athens

The Athens workshop was hosted by the Danish Institute of Archaeology in Athens, and organized in collaboration with the Institut Française Archéologique d'orientale, based in Cairo. The goal was to begin systematically building up the LCP's data set on the pottery of Egypt in the Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine eras. We invited all ceramicists currently working on Egyptian pottery, some 40 researchers in all; 30 were able to attend. We asked participants to submit data to the site in advance, so that in Athens we could address the challenge of bringing consistency to ceramic identifications, names, and definitions. The hope was to create a single system that current practitioners could use, and that future scholars could build on.

We succeeded, in dramatic fashion! We developed a flexible new mode for defining and naming ceramic wares as well as linking ceramic wares and petro-fabrics. We added 67 Egyptian wares and ware families dating to Ptolemaic, Roman, and Byzantine times. In the final wrap-up discussion participants agreed to continue adding more examples, as well as to continue working to refine and expand ware definitions and descriptions, adding and expanding petro-fabric information, and linking wares and petro-fabrics. The study of post-Pharaonic Egyptian pottery has entered a new phase, thanks to the LCP.

Where we're headed

The LCP is a research success story. Starting in 2011 with nothing more than a bright idea, it has been embraced by practicing archaeologists because it provides a way to readily access and also communicate information, to work through and refine ideas, to answer old questions, and to inspire new ones. A look at the [LCP front page](#) shows how much information is now available via the site.

Eventually the LCP will allow archaeologists and other researchers to address the sorts of research questions for which ceramics offer basic evidence. Examples: what is the relationship between an imperial economy and local prosperity? under what conditions do small-scale producers expand? Is the vitality of major exporting centers a function of location, political circumstance, or resource advantages? Do certain clay types lend themselves to certain sorts of products across long periods of time? These and other queries are, today, very difficult to pursue because it is essentially impossible to collect a sufficient amount and variety of data. By continuing to build up the LCP's storehouse of information and introduce new analytical features into the application (for example, a layer that will allow any type of data on the site to be displayed on various sorts of maps, such as geological or historical), the goal is to continue to expand the site's capabilities, creating an ever more robust tool.