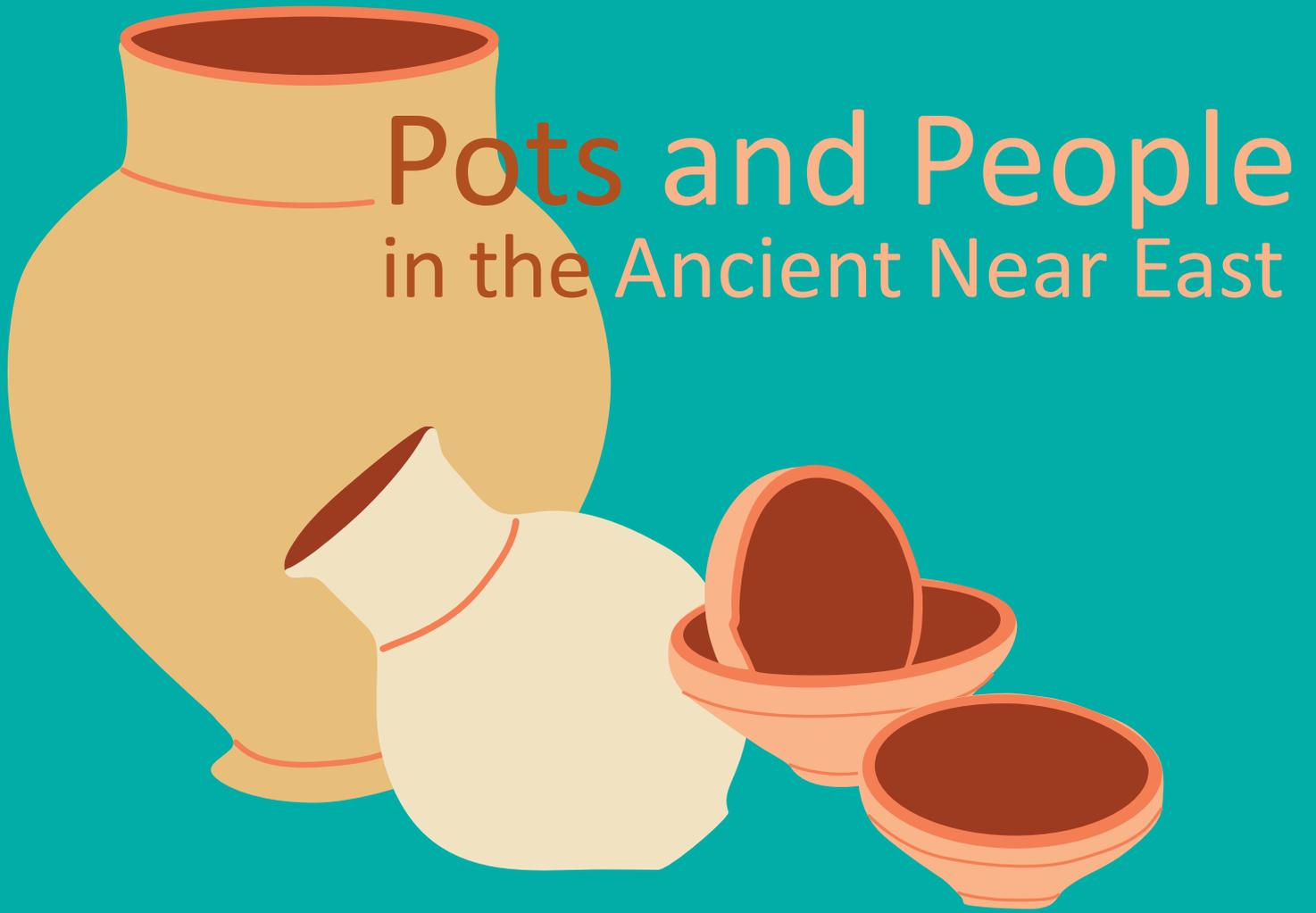


گۆزە و خەلک لە رۆژھەلاتی نزیکی کۆن



Pots and People in the Ancient Near East

الجرار والناس في الشرق الأدنى القديم

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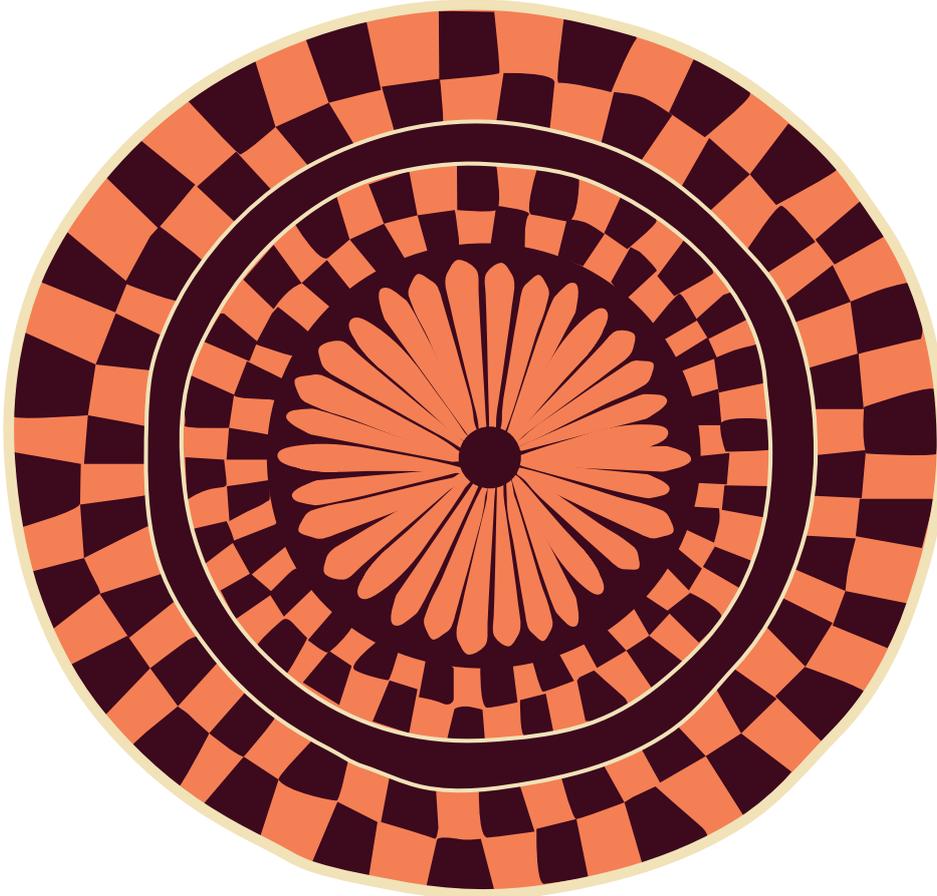
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Table of contents

1. POTS AND PEOPLE IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST
2. گۆزه و خهك له رۆژههلاتى نزيكى كوۆن
3. الجرار والناس في الشرق الأدنى القديم



Introduction

The purpose of this series of educational boxes is to introduce teachers and students, of all ages, to life in the ancient Near East with the aim of enthusing everyone to engage further with the archaeology and history of this region and to care for, and help protect, its rich and diverse cultural heritage.

The boxes offer an introduction to three important elements of life in the past:

- Pots and People in the Ancient Near East
- Food in the Ancient Near East
- The Invention and Practice of Writing in the Ancient Near East

Each box contains written information, associated illustrations, and a range of activities to facilitate children's learning.

Enjoy the journey
through time!



What's in the box?

- The recipe to make a batch of salt dough at the end of this booklet: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- A small tournette wheel: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- Finishing tools: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- A broken pot: for **ACTIVITY 2**.
- A template of a bowl for colouring (to be photocopied by the school): for **ACTIVITY 3**.
- Several small replica pots of different types.

Pottery: the beginnings of a technology

Clay has been an important part of Mesopotamian culture for many thousands of years. It has been used for lots of everyday tasks, from making the walls of people's houses to making the tablets used for writing (see Writing box). But clay is also the main raw material for one of the longest-lasting forms of technology in human history: pottery.

Pottery is a simple technology; it is made by firing clay at high temperatures (approximately 500-1,000 degrees Celsius). These high temperatures transform clay from a bendy, mouldable substance to a hard material. Once this process happens, it can not be changed back. Because of this, pottery survives for hundreds and even thousands of years, while many other materials, such as leather or reed baskets, decay and disappear. As a result, pottery is the most frequent find at the vast majority of archaeological sites.

The raw materials for pottery production are simple. You need:

- 1) Clay mixed with water;
- 2) Some added "temper" to help bind the clay together (e.g. chopped straw or small stones);
- 3) A source of fuel for firing (e.g. straw, wood, or shrubs).



These materials can be found in the landscapes around you. Clays collected from alongside rivers like the Sirwan/Diyala, for instance, are perfect for a potter to work with!

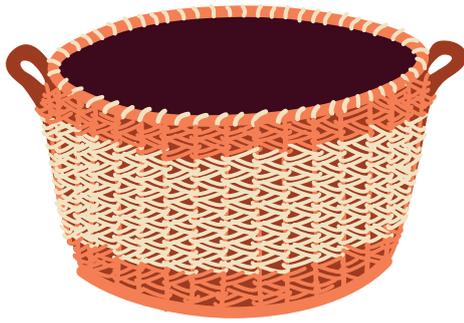
When, where, and why was pottery invented?

Pottery has played a very important part in human history across the entire world. Although the earliest pots are found in Japan, and are over 20,000 years old, it is in the ancient Near East, approximately 10,000 years ago, that pottery started to be commonly made and used.

Pots and baskets

The first pots fit into a wider tradition of vessel making, which probably already existed with the production of leather or reed baskets. In fact, some of the earliest clay pots show the impressions of reed baskets, which were used as moulds to help shape the clay. Some of the earliest pots even have decoration cut into their surfaces which are designed to look like basketry!

EARLY POTTERY AND BASKETRY



Incised decoration
from Tell Hassuna,
northern Iraq,
c.9,000 years ago.

Pots and social change

The first pots were made at the same time as other big changes in the ancient Near East occurred, when people first began to settle permanently and farm the land and cultivate crops, 10,000 years ago. The introduction of pottery was probably linked closely to the changes in food production and consumption that took place at that time (see Food box). Pottery is still connected with food today. We still use pots for storing, processing, cooking, and serving foods and drinks. Think, for example, of the bowls and plates from which you eat every day.

How were pots made?

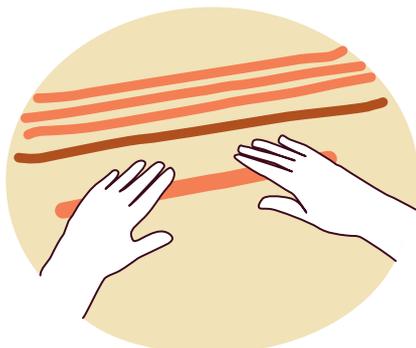
The different pottery shapes that we find are made in different ways. Here are the three main ways in which pots have been shaped in the past, and also in the present.

This educational box contains the recipe for a batch of salt dough for producing replica clay.

Hand production

The earliest pots were all hand-formed. Coils of clay were made by rolling clay into long rolls and joining these rolls together to build a vessel's shape. This technique is not very different to kneading dough while making bread. This means that simple vessels can be made by almost anyone in the community. Hand moulded pots are still made across the world today.

COIL ROLLING AND BUILDING



Wheel production

Approximately 6,000 years ago, a very different technology was introduced: wheel production. This technology allowed pots to be produced on a low, slowly turning wheel, turned by the potter or an assistant using a stick. Being able to use a wheel effectively is not an easy skill, and would have taken young apprentice potters years to learn and master. Production using the slowly turning wheel continued until about 3,000 years ago, when a new form of wheel-production began to be used more and more: the fast and continuously turning wheel. The fast-wheel allowed skilled potters to produce high quality pots very quickly. It is this fast-wheel technology that is used most commonly today, and can be found in pottery workshops all over the world.

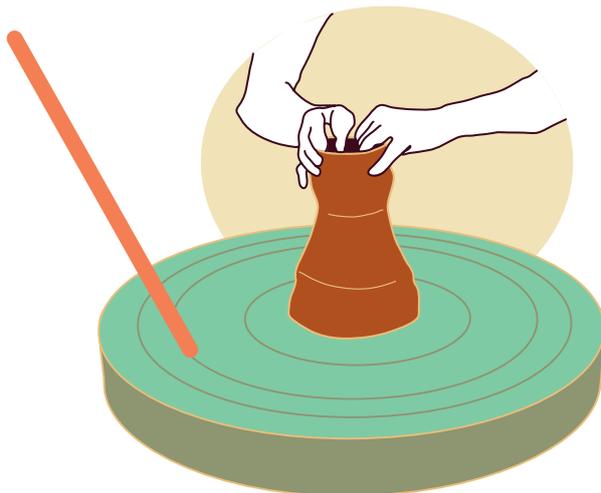
This educational box contains a small model of a slow-wheel, or “tournette”.

Finishing the shape

Once the shape has been achieved by the methods just described, they are still quite rough. Potters use lots of small tools to make their pots look neat and tidy before they are fired. Because these small tools were usually made of wood, reed, or bone, they do not survive to us archaeologically. But they probably would have looked something like the tools included in this box!

This educational box contains modern shaping tools.

SLOW-WHEEL / FAST-WHEEL TECHNOLOGY



ACTIVITY 1: You are an ancient potter. Use the clay provided to produce a pot by hand-forming, and another using the wheel. Which pot was the easiest to produce?

Where do we find pots?

Ancient pottery can be found almost everywhere. When walking across any field in your local town or village, it is possible that you will find some archaeological pottery. Archaeologists love these small, broken fragments of ancient pots, which we call “sherds”. Because these sherds do not decay over time, they represent what is left of ancient settlements. When archaeologists excavate these settlements we find lots of these sherds, and we sometimes also find complete pots; these sherds and pots provide us with a lot of information about how pots were made, used, and cared for, by people in the past.

Pottery can tell archaeologists a lot of important things about life in the past:

- **Dating:** As pottery styles change over time, they can be compared to other pots to help date archaeological sites, buildings, and rooms within buildings.
- **How people lived:** the development of different pottery styles over time can tell us about changes in how people behaved and organised their communities. We can see how pots were used, as well as who used them - which pots were used by the rich and the powerful and which pots were used by common people.
- **Ancient food and drink:** Pottery styles can tell us lots about how people produced their food, cooked their meals, and also how they ate and drank. Did people eat and drink alone, in family groups, or in large ceremonies and events?



This educational box contains a broken replica pot.



ACTIVITY 2: You are an archaeologist. Can you reassemble this broken pot?



Pottery through time...

Pottery styles and the uses of pottery have changed a lot over the last 10,000 years. These changes in shape and style can provide us with information about some of the big changes in human prehistory and history, especially with regards to the ways that people produced, stored, served, and consumed their food and drink (see Food box). So let's track some of these changes through time...

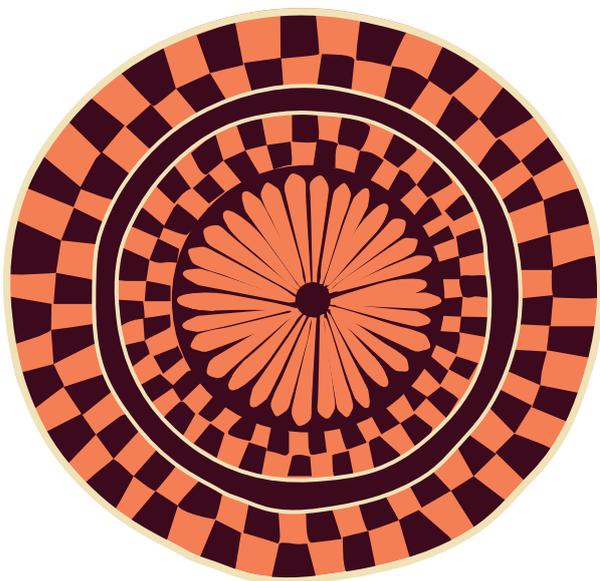
Pottery in the first villages (10,000-6,000 years ago)

This period saw people settle in permanent villages, which could support larger populations. In these villages, they grew domesticated crops and herded animals (see Food box).

BIG CRUDE VESSELS: Most early pots were plain and roughly made. They were very large and too heavy to move. This is because they were used for storing foods, like grain in houses. Some of these vessels had strange decorative designs on their surfaces. These designs were usually abstract dots or crescents, with meanings that we can not fully understand today. But they were sometimes also figures that we can recognise today – people, animals, and even faces! These decorative designs may have carried magical importance, helping to protect the food that was stored in the pots.

ORNATE PLATES AND BOWLS (example in this box): These pots started to be painted on the inside and outside with a series of designs, usually geometric in style, but sometimes showing animals too, such as oxen, gazelle, and snakes; these show us some of the things that were important to people in the past. Some of these pots were extremely well made and beautifully decorated. This is because these pots were used for eating and drinking. The most elaborately decorated bowls were involved in feasts and celebrations involving the entire community, and were probably used by powerful people as a way of showing their wealth and importance.

FINELY PAINTED BOWL



Finely painted bowl from Tell Arpachiyah, northern Iraq, c.8,000 years ago

This educational box contains blank templates of a bowl, which can be decorated with coloured pencils.

ACTIVITY 3: You are an ancient potter in an early farming village. What colours and designs would you use to paint your bowl?

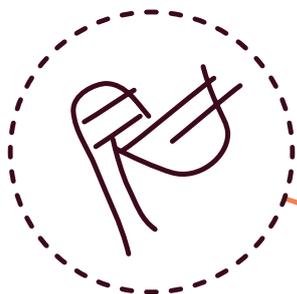
Pottery in the first cities (6,000-4,500 years ago)

As villages grew, people came together in large numbers. Expanding settlements joined together to become urban centres, which eventually formed large cities. Some people within these settlements rose to positions of power and created temples and palaces.

ROUGH BOWLS (example in this box): This was the most common pot in this period, with thousands being found across Mesopotamia and neighbouring regions. These small, shallow bowls were very roughly made, and often show the fingerprints of the potter from where they pressed the clay into a mould with their hands. The use of these rough bowls is currently unclear. Some people have interpreted them as bread moulds, used for baking bread; others see them as ration bowls, which were given to labourers of the state in exchange for their work. These bowls are shown in the earliest proto-cuneiform texts (see Writing box), where they are positioned next to a human head to represent the word for “ration”.

JARS (example in this box): Sometimes jars had long, drooping spouts, and sometimes they did not. Sometimes they were also beautifully decorated with red and black paint, in a style known as “Scarlet Ware”. Some of the most spectacular examples of Scarlet Ware have been found at ancient settlements located along the banks of the lower Sirwan/Diyala River. These jars probably contained drinks which were shared amongst a group of people. Drinks could be poured from the jar’s spout into smaller pots, or could be drunk directly from the jar through straws. This is shown in ancient art, where images show people sharing a drink from a communal jar.

POTTERY IN THE FIRST CITIES



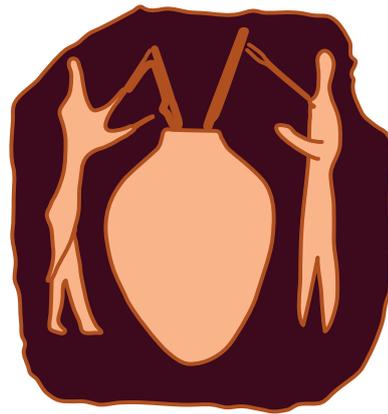
Scarlet Ware from Khafajah, lower Diyala/Sirwan, c.5,000 years ago

Food bowls shown in proto-cuneiform texts, c.5,500 years ago.



COMMUNAL DRINKING

Seal impression showing people drinking beer from a jar, from Tepe Gawra, northern Iraq, c.6,000 years ago.



Pottery in the first states (4,500-2,500 years ago)

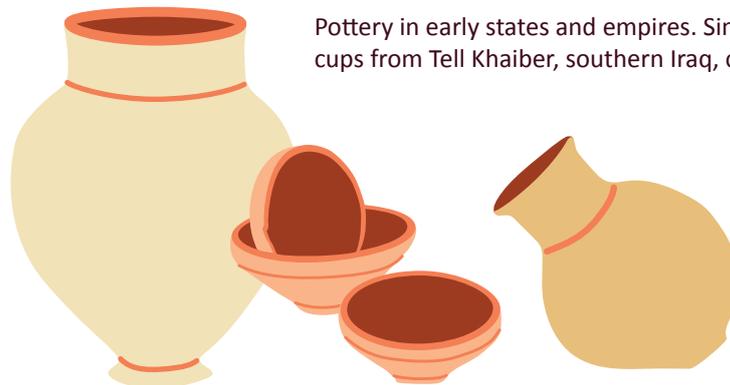
Different cities from across the region joined together under the same ruler to form larger states. These states formed across Mesopotamia and in its surrounding regions.

SIMPLE POTS (example in this box): During this time, pottery became simple and more standardised in shape. These pots had clear uses. Jars were used for storage, cooking pots for cooking, small bowls for eating, and cups for drinking. There were also sieves used for filtering substances. The complicated and beautiful decoration of earlier years had almost entirely disappeared. The exact same pots were now used over very large areas with very little regional differences.

ANCIENT ART: People no longer ate or drank from communal pots, but from their own personal vessels instead. The Standard of Ur shows a group of diners holding their own small cups, while the so-called “Garden Party” of Nineveh shows the king, Ashurbanipal, reclining in a beautiful garden with a small bowl balanced skilfully in one hand. Eating and drinking, and the vessels involved in these practices, became an important signal of wealth and power (see Food box). It is likely that powerful people would have drunk from vessels made of gold or silver, and poorer people from plain pots.

PLAIN POTTERY

Pottery in early states and empires. Simple bowls and cups from Tell Khaiber, southern Iraq, c.3,500 years ago.

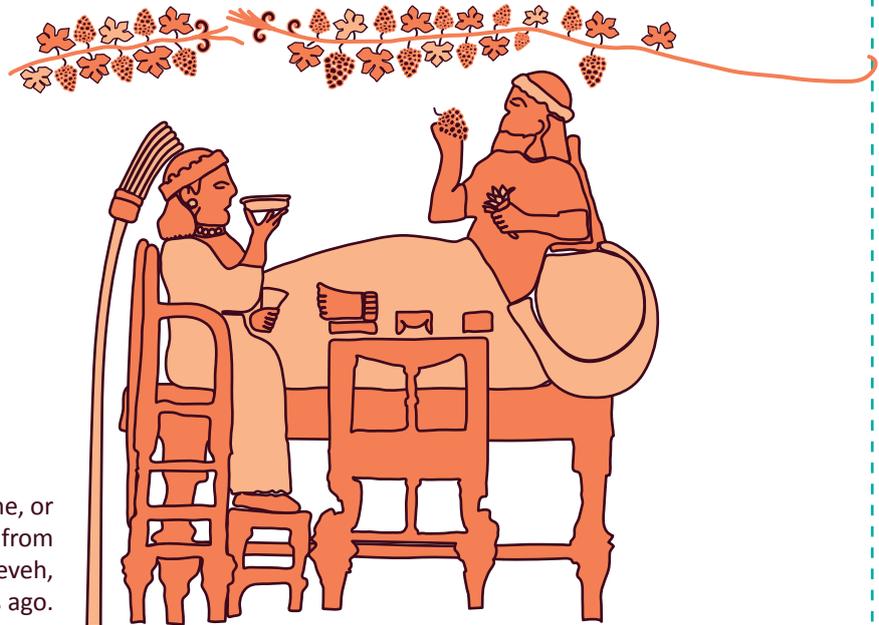


This educational box contains recreated pots that represent these different periods.

ANCIENT ART



Elements from the Standard of Ur, a decorated wooden box from the Royal Cemetery of Ur, southern Iraq, c.4,500 years ago.



Elements from the Banquet Scene, or Garden Party, an Assyrian wall relief from the North Palace at Nineveh, northern Iraq, c.2,600 years ago.

What did Mesopotamian people think about their pots?

Pottery was a meaningful part of Mesopotamian people's everyday lives and this had a big effect on how they viewed the world. Many ancient textual references to pottery compare the cycle of human life to that of a pot: just as people are born, pots are formed, just as people live their lives, pots are used, and just as people die, pots are broken.

Creation

Dingirmah, known as the "lady potter", was a Mesopotamian goddess dedicated to potters and their pots. But she was also responsible for pregnancy and childbirth. In one text Dingirmah "pinched off fourteen pieces of clay" and used these to create "seven males" and "seven females". Sometimes these pieces of clay were placed in ovens or "kiln-wombs" to bring about this transformation. Just as pots are fired, babies are born.

Destruction

“...people were smashed as if they were clay pots”

Destruction is a very common theme in Mesopotamian poetry and myth. The great Mesopotamian city of Ur was destroyed by an invading army 5,000 years ago. In a description of the event, people’s deaths are compared to the smashing of a pot. In the aftermath of the destruction, it is said that the city’s “people, not potsherds, littered its sides”. In the famous Mesopotamian flood story, Atrahasis, an enormous bird tears apart the heavens and smashes the land “like a pot”; the result of this was a great flood pouring out from sky and earth. Once the flood had retreated, the hero Gilgamesh looked upon a world in which the entire human race “had turned into clay”.

The Mesopotamian underworld, where ancient people were thought to go after they died, was sometimes also known as the “place of the potsherd”.

Death and burial

When Mesopotamian mythical hero, Gilgamesh, returns from the underworld, he says:

*“I saw him whom you saw, whose ghost has
nobody to supply it:
He feeds on the dregs from dishes, and bits of bread
that lie abandoned in the streets.”*

Just as the living needed food and drink to survive (see Food box), so too did the dead. That is why pottery bowls, cups, and goblets, were often buried with the dead, or were placed just outside of their tombs, to provide them with food and drink in the afterlife. Spirits that did not receive this nourishment could not rest happily, and were thought to haunt the living relatives that had neglected them.

BURIAL



Burial with drinking goblet from Khani Masi, upper Diyala/Sirwan, c.3,500 years ago.

ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

- 1) How do you think people prepared and stored food before pottery was invented?
- 2) Why is pottery so important for archaeologists?
- 3) Why do you think people in Mesopotamia frequently thought of pots as similar to humans?

Salt dough recipe

INGREDIENTS

The following ingredients are designed for a group of 10 children.

- 5 cups of salt (1.25l)*
- 10 cups of flour (2.5l)*
- 4 cups of water (2l)*

INSTRUCTIONS

- 1. Mix salt and flour together in a large bowl. Separate into several smaller bowls, if necessary.*
- 2. Gradually stir in water. Mix well until it forms a dough consistency.*
- 3. Place the dough onto a table and knead with your hands until smooth and combined.*
- 4. Make your pottery shapes using the salt dough!*
- 5. (OPTIONAL) Place the salt dough creations into an oven at 180C. The amount of time needed to bake depends on the size and thickness of the salt dough creations. Salt dough can also be air dried as an alternative to oven baking.*

TIP

- Salt dough will keep for a few days if stored in an airtight container.*