

# Ceramics in Circumpolar Prehistory

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*Ceramics in Circumpolar Prehistory* is an exciting book in its implications for understanding the adoption and development of ceramics beyond the ancient Near East. It boasts an excellent introductory chapter describing the nascent study of ceramics in non-sedentary societies and from there develops a strong underlying thesis throughout, ending with a solid and intriguing argument for an association between the development of ceramics by hunter-gatherers in unfavourable conditions for pottery and the processing of fish grease as a local or traded feasting medium. Several areas for future research and experimental projects are highlighted, any one of which would radically improve our understanding of factors behind the uptake of ceramics and their relationship to prehistoric lifeways and subsistence across the globe.

The eleven chapters presented are highly accessible to the non-specialist and student reader, being both discrete sources and carrying relevant themes throughout. Beyond the introduction, Uchiyama first lays the framework for the central thesis with a collection of hypotheses proposing links between the cultural shift in subsistence focus towards seasonal fish resources and the production of ceremonial ceramics in the Incipient Jomon period of Japan. The central, seemingly practical, inclusion of ceramics in

the expressions of cultural identity and status bound up in feasting provides a compelling impetus for their uptake in this previously aceramic society, a theme that is returned to throughout the book. Following this is Hommel and the late Vetrov's ground-breaking English-language examination of early Siberian ceramics, focusing on the contrasting uptake of ceramics by nomadic hunter-gatherer cultures around Ust'-Karenga. Their conclusions are grounded in an integrated study of dwelling forms, clay/inclusion sources, typology and paleoenvironmental evidence, amply illustrating ceramics successfully integrated into nomadic lifeways as a response to the summertime availability of useful aquatic resources by those with access.

The next chapter also contrasts neighbours, this time in the Baltic where Isaksson, Gibbs and Jordan examine fish products being supplied to Funnel Beaker agriculturalists within feasting ware made by nomads of the maritime Pitted Ware Culture as an explanation for the apparent comingling of cultural stylistic traits within a specific repertoire of vessels. Returning to the Pacific, Gjesfjeld examines the sheer difficulty of producing ceramics in the Kuril Islands and the pivotal role of such vessels in the trade of maritime resources, following the rise and decline of insular variations alongside the routes associated with them. Admiraal and Knecht shift to similar climatic challenges in Southwest Alaska, suggesting some origins for divergent traditions of ceramic adoption related to their cultural culinary uses. Further north in Alaska, Anderson's examination of ethnographic evidence regarding the creation and curation of ceramics by non-sedentary communities with a maritime focus provides a keen argument for reviewing assumptions about the use life and functions of poorly-fired pottery. Frink and Harry present a more traditional analysis on the seasonal influences on preferences for soapstone versus ceramic cookware in subarctic North America.

The ninth chapter sees Drew et al. offer an exciting new batch of data from improved residue analysis techniques and skeletal isotope studies, comparing the lifeways and extent of ceramic adoption among boreal and coastal hunter-gatherers. Particularly interesting is that

alternate technologies have occasionally been preserved in the study area, underlining the specific but currently unquantified attraction of pottery for the purpose of processing fish resources. Boyd et al. find some contrasting conclusions regarding cooking methods in their study of ceramic adoption associated with the processing of maize and beans rather than fish. Though the chapter favours the latter interpretation, they raise the important question of whether seasonal and ceremonial concentrations of diet can be easily distinguished in the archaeological record.

Overall in the volume, the few unelaborated lists of eye-crossingly dense pottery typologies are easy enough to mark and look up, not presenting an inconvenience. Permafrost and other environmental concerns impacting the physical production of pottery are admirably covered, including specific investigations into clay sources, temper and wood availability as well as the prospects and advantages of alternate technologies. The reported use of whale oil and/or blood coating to improve the use life of poorly-fired pots is intriguing, and it is easy to see the scope for future experimental work in this area and others, particularly in defining the characteristics of ceramic vessels that favour them for use with aquatic fats.

Newcomers to circumpolar studies may find this volume's conclusions less persuasive, since the introduction lacks emphasis on the strongly migratory lifeways and consequent long-range connections that characterize the circumpolar North. A surprising omission is a lack of any reference to Bear Cult or the relationship between bears and circumpolar feasting in general, especially when Hayden concludes the book with further research questions including the use of mysteriously oversized vessels. Likewise, the reduction of the great seasonal, dietary and cultural information available from avian remains to the bland remark that 'birds' formed part of the diet in a couple of the pieces is disappointing; perhaps a missed opportunity. In the same vein, in areas where seabirds are potentially more available or available for longer periods than salmon runs in these studies, the methodologies are often unclear as to how residue analysis is secured from picking up the fish-related amino acids that

may be present in the grease or defensive secretions of such species (collected historically in other northern environments). Lastly, where most potential deficiencies are ably discussed in the concluding chapter, Uchiyama's hypothesis that the distribution of avian species in Chapter Two's study area remained constant over centuries of climatic fluctuation, in habitats continually used and modified by humans, remains both unaddressed and largely unsupported. The selective use of a rare resource or neglect of an available one is particularly significant in an analysis of why, how and where a society becomes more sedentary, as well as any examination of components in the proposed fish-feasting ceremonies it would be well to consider this an area for development.

*Ceramics in Circumpolar Prehistory* is a stimulating and significant piece of research. The relative slenderness of the volume reflects the cutting-edge nature of the research and the authors' collective enthusiasm to bring these papers to the academic community. It is mentioned in the first, introductory chapter that the book is essentially the results of discussing striking widespread similarities discovered between the contributors' diverse projects over the course of a single conference; such an origin accounts for the stylistic heterogeneity of the papers and the occasional as-sent typographic error which might otherwise have been weeded out or more artfully arranged by an editor. American English is standard throughout, but the assortment of dates in B.P., B.C and. "\_\_\_\_\_ years ago" can make relative timelines difficult to follow. Furthermore, I feel it would be more appropriate to further separate the long-obsolete notion that social or technological complexity is an indicator of human intelligence further from the credible theories for ceramic evolution. Even though this outlier is clearly included for the purposes of scientific rigour and duly dismissed in the following paragraphs, the inclusion of a colonial-era concept alongside valid hypotheses is a decidedly unfortunate piece of framing in an otherwise thoughtful and forward-looking book.

To conclude, this book fulfills its promise of being the first steps on a new path to understanding a fundamental yet long-obscure aspect of civilization processes. It asks new questions about what influences

technological adoption and adaptation, and, through focusing on societies to whom high mobility was a necessity of survival, amplifies the details that might seem peripheral elsewhere. Some of these questions begin to be answered with the aid of newly-improved technologies and novel experimentation, but in the end *Ceramics in Circumpolar Prehistory* is a volume that invites future discussion far beyond the scope of its own chapters and provides an invaluable resource for future work on its subject matter.