
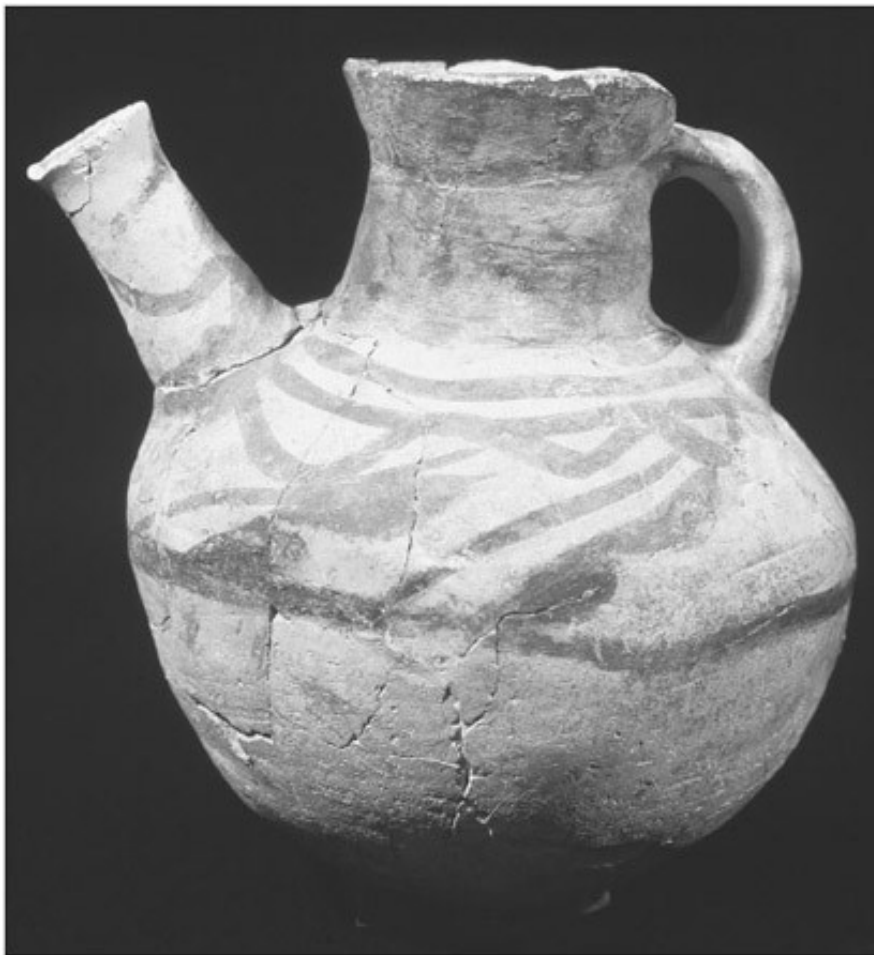


Pottery

 *The Greenhaven Encyclopedia of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 2007
From World History in Context

Pottery (or ceramic) objects, both intact and broken, make up a large portion of the moundlike debris piles, or tells, found all over [Mesopotamia](#). Indeed, vessels, figurines, and other artifacts of baked clay were the most common products manufactured by ancient Mesopotamian craftspeople. However, unlike the ancient Greeks, whose pottery was often an outlet for artistic expression and of high quality, with a few exceptions Mesopotamian potters produced pottery of largely uninspired, even crude design and execution. Thus, in Mesopotamia ceramics was a minor art at best, especially compared to native architecture and sculpture, which were often of superb quality. Nevertheless,



study of the remains of pottery has greatly aided modern archaeologists in dating ancient sites in the region. This is because people usually made pottery objects featuring shapes, painted designs, and other characteristics that were distinct to their own time periods. The basics of dating Mesopotamian pottery were pioneered by British archaeologist Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) in the 1890s.

Pottery was in use at least as early as 7000 B.C. in Mesopotamia. The first pottery objects were shaped by hand and were baked in open fires. Hotter, more controlled firing was possible after the introduction of primitive kilns circa 6000 B.C., and subsequently kilns were made of fired brick and came in several different shapes and sizes. Due to a lack of oxygen in these kilns, during the firing process the reddish brown clay turned gray or black. In addition to hand shaping, early potters employed simple molds, into which they pressed the moist clay. A slow-turning, hand-operated potter's wheel appeared in Mesopotamia around 4000 B.C., making mass production of jars and other commonly used objects more feasible. A faster wheel came into use circa 2000 B.C. And Assyrian and Babylonian potters introduced ceramic items coated with colored glazes in the first millennium B.C. Pottery cooking pots, cups, plates, bowls, and jars continued to be made, but their quality was usually mediocre, as the well-to-do generally preferred metals such as bronze, silver, and gold for fine dinnerware and decorative vases.

SEE ALSO: crafts and craftspeople; sculpture; tell

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