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Pottery Makes its Appearance

Archaeologists working on excavations at Tågerup in Skåne have identified layers from a period that began 8,500 years ago and ended a full 1,700 years later. The site shows clearly how a first settlement flourished for several centuries at the time of an older culture known as the Kongemose. But then all traces of human life cease for 300 years. The period of extreme cold 8,200 years ago must have dealt a serious blow. However, the coup de grâce for the Kongemose culture seems to have been the flooding of the settlement at about the time that Doggerland disappeared into the depths of the sea. About 300 years later, a new culture known as the Ertebølle made its appearance.

During the earlier period, the Kongemose, life was easier. There was relatively little competition for natural resources. People were few and far between. It was easy to find enough to eat, and people had ample free time. This meant they could focus their full attention on making attractive artefacts from high-quality flint, as well as bone, antlers, wood and plant fibres. Children could spend plenty of time at 'flint school', learning to be skilled and aesthetically aware toolmakers like their elders. That they practised is evident from the half-finished objects they left behind.

Skåne archaeologists interpret the bone remains found in the settlement as showing that the Kongemose people were discriminating and persistent hunters. They selected mainly the youngest and oldest deer, thereby maintaining stocks for future generations. The only buildings at the settlement seem to have been a single longhouse and a few round huts.

By contrast, during the later period corresponding to the Ertebølle culture the settlement was more like a large village with hundreds of inhabitants. There were several large permanent buildings. At the water's edge were elaborate

systems of traps made of wooden posts and poles, designed to catch eels and other fish.

These people seem to have indiscriminately hunted anything and everything that was edible. They were not concerned about the age of the deer they shot. Hedgehogs and squirrels were also perfectly acceptable prey. Tools of flint, bone and antler were produced quickly and carelessly. Function was all that mattered now; aesthetics and perfectionism were set aside.

A skeleton reveals that one of their children died with an arrow in his back – perhaps in an internal conflict, perhaps as the victim of a rival group.

Life during the Ertebølle period was clearly harder than it had once been. But then came a significant innovation that may have helped make life easier. People began to use ceramic vessels for cooking.

As I described in Chapter 5, the people of Dolní Věstonice made clay figurines, which they laid in the fire to make them explode – perhaps as a serious ritual, perhaps as an entertaining party piece. That was happening a good 30,000 years ago. But making complete earthenware pots for cooking is a different matter – and considerably trickier.

The most ancient ceramic vessels we know of today were discovered in East Asia. At the time of writing, the very oldest examples of ceramics are a few potsherds from Xianrendong cave in China. Having been dated at about 20,000 years, they were made when the last part of the Ice Age was at its very coldest. Other finds from the same location show clearly that the people who lived in Xianrendong cave were hunter-gatherers. Ancient remnants of ceramic pots have also been found at the River Amur in Siberia and in Japan.

The oldest known ceramics in Japan are known as Jomon. The earliest finds date back some 15,000 years. Archaeologists have analysed burnt leftovers found on potsherds. The level of various isotopes in the traces of food shows that Jomon vessels

were used chiefly for cooking saltwater fish or marine mammals. Yet these pots were found inland, a long distance from the nearest sea coast. To make an educated guess, the early potters on the Japanese islands may have caught fish such as salmon and eels on their way upstream to spawn. These fish were put in the pots and cooked on a fire to make an early type of salmon or eel soup.

In the past, many archaeologists believed that the art of pottery was first developed when people went over to farming. But that has been proven wrong. The finds from the Xianrendong cave in China date back more than 10,000 years before the first farming at the same location. And it is absolutely clear that the Jomon vessels from Japan were used by people who lived by hunting and fishing.

A more pertinent question today is who first came up with the technology for making earthenware pots. Were these people from Siberia, China or Japan? Did the first farmers in the Middle East learn how to make clay pots from East Asians or Africans, or did they invent the art themselves, independently of anyone else? There is no consensus on this among archaeologists. Some believe the technology must have been invented in one place and have spread from there, while others think pottery may have been developed independently in several places.

In any event, we know that the first traces of earthenware pots in Denmark and Skåne date back some 6,700 years to the Ertebølle hunting culture. Indeed, the world's first example of spiced food is to be found in just such vessels.

Ertebølle vessels were large and had a pointed base. They were ideal for making fish soup for a group of people. The pointed underside prevented food from burning too easily. Chemical analyses of potsherds show that pots in northern Europe were also used to make fish soup. In shards of Ertebølle vessels from Denmark and northern Germany, researchers have also identified microscopic traces of seeds from the *Alliaria petiolata* plant (commonly known as garlic mustard or Jack-by-the-hedge), a relative of mustard that has peppery seeds.

In earlier times, archaeologists equated both pottery and the use of seasoning with farming societies. It was thought that hunter-gatherers lived in a more primitive way, that they wanted only to fill their bellies and lacked time and energy for the finer things in life – such as herbs and spices that provide flavouring but no nourishment. We can now dismiss that view. The world's oldest known seasoned dish is a Nordic fish soup spiced with peppery garlic mustard seeds.

Ertebølle pottery also includes small, shallow bowls that were probably used as lamps. They resemble the stone lamps used by people from the Magdalenian culture when they were creating their cave paintings. Both types of lamp are small bowls designed to hold animal fat; a wick made of plant material would have been dipped in the fat and lit.

So it is clear that hunting peoples in northern Europe were using pottery some 6,700 years ago. The question is how the technology arrived here. Is it possible that the art of pottery came directly from East Asia via hunting peoples in Russia? Some archaeologists think so. An older school of thought is that pottery is more likely to have spread from people who had begun to live on farming in the Middle East.

When I consult Russian archaeologists on the matter, it turns out that there is an element of truth in both views. The very oldest known pottery in eastern Europe is about 8,900 years old and was found at an archaeological site called Rakushechny Yar on the lower reaches of the River Don, a few dozen kilometres from where it flows into the Sea of Azov. The people of Rakushechny Yar kept domestic cattle and sheep even in those early days. Their buildings and stone tools also resemble those of farming peoples in the Middle East, on the other side of the Black Sea.

From the herders of Rakushechny Yar, pottery spread to hunting peoples in other regions of what is now European Russia. This diffusion was slow to begin with. Russian archaeologists believe that clay vessels were initially status symbols used for ritual purposes rather than everyday objects. But ceramic vessels gradually became increasingly common.

The art of making pottery spread further westwards and northwards, and gradually all the way to the Baltic Sea.

By about 7,000 years ago, clay pots had reached the Baltic and Finland, including the Åland Islands. The type of pottery concerned is called Comb Ware, as combs were used to make the typical patterns on the outside.

Ertebølle pottery reached Denmark and southern Sweden some 6,700 years ago. The Ertebølle pottery of the southern Scandinavian hunting peoples shows the influence of Comb Ware from the east. However, it also has technical similarities with a type of pottery used by farmers from more southerly parts of the continent, known as Linear Band Ware. Quite simply, it is a hybrid between the pottery of the eastern hunters and that of the southern farmers. Clay vessels – one of the greatest technological advances ever to reach Sweden – were a mix. Just as the people would be.