

Archaeology, Pottery and Malay Culture

By John N Miksic

Pottery is the most abundant type of artefact made by humans throughout history and was first made in East Asia about 15,000 years ago. Since that time potters have made artefacts for almost every conceivable form of human activity. Even the US Space Shuttle was covered in ceramic tiles because they were the only materials that could withstand the heat of re-entry into the earth's atmosphere. Owing to pottery's ubiquitous nature, it can shed light on all aspects of human life during the period in which people evolved from hunters and gatherers to forming civilisations. We can use pottery to study art, technology, religion, economics, migration and even gender. Most pottery in history has been made by women, while men dug the clay and helped with the firing.

Pottery has been made in Southeast Asia for at least 8,000 years. During the Neolithic era, pottery was being made in the Malay Peninsula and Sumatra. It belonged to the cord-marking tradition, which is also found in other parts of mainland Southeast Asia.¹ By about 2,000 years ago, a new style of pottery appeared along the coasts of the Straits of Melaka, from south Thailand through the Malay Peninsula, Sumatra, Riau, the coasts of Borneo and even West Java. This pottery adopted a new technique of decoration using a carved wooden

paddle. The distribution of this new style pottery is the same as that of the Malay language today. We cannot prove that this pottery was always made by people who spoke Malay, but we can say that pottery defines a cultural sphere which coincides with that of Malay society today. In archaeological terms, this signifies that a group of people with similar artistic traditions had emerged. Similar pottery



Traditional Malay pottery was mainly made by women. The women of Galogandung in West Sumatra still carry on the tradition of making pottery using the ancient paddle and anvil method. This woman is making a cooking vessel

is found in the area of Sulawesi, Maluku and the southwestern Pacific; the term Lapita has been coined for the latter area. It seems likely that the ancestors of the modern Malays were migrating both eastward and westward around 2,000 years ago from a centre of dispersal somewhere around Sulawesi or eastern Borneo.

For 50 years, archaeologists have believed that the ancestors of the Malays spread into the Philippines from Taiwan around 4,500 years ago.² More recently, scholars have begun to study the results of DNA analysis, which suggests to some that the Malays actually first became an ethnolinguistic group somewhere in the southern Philippines or north Borneo, and spread both east and west from there.

The first scholar to specialise in the earthenware pottery of insular Southeast Asia was W G Solheim II. He began his research in the southern Philippines in the 1950s³ and published an influential article, *Pottery and the Malayo-Polynesians*, in 1964.⁴ He had a long and very productive career. In 2003 he updated his research in a detailed article.⁵ In 2006 he produced another extensive book entitled *Archaeology and Culture in Southeast Asia: Unraveling the Nusantao* (The University of the Philippines Press: Quezon City) in which he discussed at length the Malayo-Polynesian groups of Southeast Asia, Madagascar and the Pacific Ocean, of which the people now called Malays form a member, along with the Javanese, Balinese, Minangkabau, Batak, Iban and many others. One of his objectives was to explore the link between pottery styles and the formation of ethnic identity.

Solheim tried his best to make the case for the argument that pottery is a very important indicator of linguistic and cultural affiliation. This link has been found to be statistically probable, but not 100% reliable. Pottery can be traded



Bau Malay-type ware as defined by W G Solheim II utilised decorations such as circles and wavy lines. These sherds were found at the 11th-13th century trading port of Kota Cina, near Medan, North Sumatra

¹ Kamdi Kamil. 1975/76-1976/77. "Bentuk dan tradisi tembikar pra sejarah di Malaysia: satu diskripsi ringkas." *Jebat* no. 5/6: 124-146.

² Peter Bellwood, 1997 *Prehistory of the Indo-Malaysian Archipelago*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press. P. 219.

³ W.G. Solheim II, 1964 *The Archaeology of Central Philippines*. Monograph 10. Manila: National Institute of Science and Technology.

⁴ W.G. Solheim II 1964 "Pottery and the Malayo-Polynesians." *Current Anthropology* 5/5: 360, 376-384.

⁵ W.G. Solheim II 2003 "Southeast Asian earthenware pottery and its spread," in J.N. Miksic, ed., *Earthenware in Southeast Asia*. Singapore: Singapore University Press, pp. 1-21

over long distances between unrelated groups of people and some pottery styles and techniques of manufacture can also be transferred from one group to another. It is therefore necessary to be cautious when drawing conclusions about the ethnic composition of the population of an archaeological site from pottery. With these caveats in mind, we can still rely on pottery to paint a picture of the formation and spread of Malay identity and the economy and social structure of the Malays during the last 2,000 years.

Solheim identified what he defined as three pottery “traditions” in the Philippines, which he termed *Sahuynh-Kalanay*, *Novaliches*, and *Bau Malay*. He used data from a survey made in the Philippines by Karl Guthe from the University of Michigan. This is not an ideal procedure, since Guthe did not conduct excavations, so the stratigraphy and chronological distribution of the pottery is difficult to specify. Based on association with Chinese pottery, Solheim determined that the *Sahuynh-Kalanay* pottery was oldest, followed by *Bau-Malay*, which was then replaced by *Novaliches*.

The name *Sahuynh-Kalanay* is taken from two archaeological sites: Sahuynh in South Vietnam, and Kalanay in the Philippines. Similar pottery is found in both areas. South Vietnam is the area where the Cham ethnic group was most numerous until the Vietnamese moved in during the 15th century; the Cham are speakers of a Malayo-Polynesian language. It is thus not surprising that the two areas should display an early correlation.

Bau Malay pottery is more common in Borneo, western Indonesia, and peninsular Malaysia than in the Philippines. Some of the oldest examples have been found in the Musi River valley of south Sumatra. Solheim’s three types have been criticised by later archaeologists, especially the *Novaliches* type, which does not seem to be important. The Bau Malay incised and paddle-marked types seem to be the most widespread. They have even been found in southern India; Indian archaeologists believe that it was taken there by early Malay sailors.⁶

Research in Sumatra and Singapore in particular has yielded many examples of this type of pottery.



Paddle-marked Malay sherds from the Padang, Singapore, 14th century



White, fine paste ware kendi from Jambi, Sumatra, 12th century

Scholars are still gathering new data that will refine our understanding of its development over 2,000 years and also of local variations. One other important type of pottery made in the Malay zone exists. It was probably made in the Satingphra area in what is now southern Thailand, still mainly inhabited by Malays. Potters there achieved a high level of skill in making ceremonial water vessels called *kendi*. They utilised a clay deposit of particularly high quality to make vessels which were so attractive that they were traded to places as far away as Singapore,⁷ Java and the Philippines. The normal colour of this pottery was white, but the potters also made red *kendis* for the Javanese.

When Islam came to Southeast Asia, another type of pottery began to appear in the Malay area, especially at the north end of the Straits of Melaka, including Aceh, Kedah, Perak and Patani. The main product of this new style was also *kendis*, but the favourite colour changed from white to black, and the spouts changed from long and slender to short and bulbous. This type of black pottery, sometimes polished with a pebble until it gleamed, is still made in northern Perak today. The paddle-marking and Bau Malay type decorations faded away during the 16th century, though some nice examples have been found in archaeological excavations of this period at Johor Lama and are now in the Heritage Conservation Centre.

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Images courtesy of the author

⁶ Tansen Sen 2014: Maritime Southeast Asia between South Asia and China to the sixteenth century. *TRaNS: Trans-Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia* 2: 31-59; Selvakumar, V. 2011: “Contacts between India and Southeast Asia in ceramic and boat building traditions,” in Pierre-Yves Manguin, A. Mani and Geoff Wade (eds.), *Early Interactions between South and Southeast Asia: Reflections on Cross-Cultural Exchange*, pp. 197-220. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

⁷ John N Miksic 2013. *Singapore and the Silk Road of the Sea*. Singapore: NUS Press/National Museum of Singapore; Chapter 6, “Products of ancient Singapore.”