

The Stories Ceramic Shards Can Tell

By Kyle David Latinis

We think of ceramics as being functional – pots, plates, bowls; or as decorative, cultural, religious or prestige items – such as incense burners, vases, urns, burial jars, mosaics, statues, imperial ware, etc. Ceramics are also pieces of art, expressing many things from myths and stories to political statements. We also assign values to well-made and ancient pottery, like any other form of art or antique. Value is mostly based on rareness, age, ownership, authorship (creator), cultural affiliation, craftsmanship and other aesthetic properties. But are these the most salient characteristics? Are they the most important considerations for archaeologists and archaeological questions?



A kraak shard

We also have to consider that many ceramics are functional items: particularly bricks, tiles, pipes, toilets and so forth. These are often neglected in the narratives many museums display. Many are not just functional, but also representative of cultural preference and prestige.

Ceramic shards (broken bits of pottery), like other objects, have narratives that are often far more important than monetary wealth, but we have to create their narratives through research. Different narratives can be created from different analytical techniques. Broken pot shards and the narratives they reveal, even if monetarily worthless, are priceless when it comes to the information they can provide.

Because ceramics can be crafted and decorated in thousands of ways, they can be used to identify cultural, technological and temporal trends – much like clothing and fashion. We can infer shape, design, production technology, function, origin, use, cultural affiliation, temporal periods, etc from even the smallest pieces.

And shards can tell us much more if we ask the right questions and find the right methods of analysis. Asking questions about shards helps us exercise our creativity and critical thinking skills.

Of critical importance, if you really want shards to ‘talk’ to you and tell you their story, is asking relevant, answerable



Shard of a made-in-Thailand tile found in Java

questions. “What were *you* used for?”

Physically handling shards is a must. Virtual imaging and drawings help a lot. Viewing pots in glass cases is nice. However, there is no comparison to physically handling shards. Tactile, visual and compositional assessments are crucial. Most compositional analyses are done in labs to determine ‘recipes’ and ‘technologies’. However, you have to select the right samples and this takes a lot of handling in order to select the right ones. Also, we cannot forget that contents are vitally important, ranging from food items to human bones – even precious metals and jewels. Ceramics are a commodity and also a container for commodities.

Potting clays have certain geologically distinct recipes as well as culturally and temporally defined *chaînes opératoires* (methods of procurement, manufacture, technology and trade) that vary culturally and change over time and space. Pots are like cakes. They have a basic set of ingredients

but can vary considerably. Do you need to eat a whole cake to identify it or will a bite do? Pots are the same – a piece will often suffice.

So how does one analyse shards? At first, most people try to imagine the shard in its complete form like a puzzle piece. With enough experience, handling and good reference collections, this is easy to



Basket of shards from the Dehua kilns of China, photo courtesy of Patricia Bjaaland Welch

accomplish. We can identify an object from a diagnostic element or trait. For example, we don't need a whole shoe to identify a Nike; all we need is a piece with a recognisable fragment – perhaps the Nike swoosh emblem. It's the same with pot shards.

Moreover, it's not just a single shard that is important for archaeologists and historians. It's often the assemblage. An assemblage consists of hundreds, thousands and even millions of fragments. The volume, variation and spatial contexts matter. They can tell you the extent of the site, the intensity of activities, the type of activities, the ethnic and social class variance in an urban site, and where the industrial areas were located. For example, the Kedah Tua site in north Malaysia has an estimated 100,000 to 1,000,000 *tuyère* (ceramic air pipes for iron smelting). What does that tell us about the type and intensity of iron production almost 1,500-2,000 years ago?

Why would a 14th century site in Singapore have 30-40% Chinese celadon shards, while a contemporaneous site 2,000 km away in the spice islands of East Indonesia has only 1%? Why would 0.01% 15th-16th century Thai and Vietnamese shards exist in Singaporean sites, while 5% exist in Maluku, 10% in Cambodia, or 80% in a shipwreck?

It is not just functionality and local representation we consider, but also socio-economic connections and value chains. Trade wares (particularly Chinese, Indian, Thai, Vietnamese, Cham, Japanese, Burmese, etc) tell us a lot about the business and cultural relations of the past. Also, what do the locally produced, relatively utilitarian earthenware shards imply? They often represent various nested socio-economic value chains and identities – something possibly more valuable than long-distance value chains. We see this with certain morphologies and design patterns quite clearly.

We also have to consider the cultural value of certain ceramics. For example, a 13th century Chinese cheap celadon food bowl can become a valuable marital exchange dowry item or conflict resolution offering 2,000 kilometres east in Maluku – still in use and circulated today for the same purposes.

We also need to think of the other things recovered with shards. At Koh Ker (a 10th century rogue-like Angkorian capital in Cambodia) in a site adjacent to the royal palace, for example, we find a lot of cooking pots. Cooking pots are not unusual in a household site. However, the volume in this case is unusual. Why so many? There are other large



The author (left) leading a shard workshop, organised by the Southeast Asian Ceramic Society (SEACS). Photo courtesy SEACS

cooking features – ash layers and ovens. The faunal remains consisting of processed and cooked animal bones and shells represent over 20 species – mostly exotic and high value items. The size, distributions, density and type of faunal remains are hardly consistent with a typical household kitchen. Could this site have been a royal kitchen?

Why are Chinese, Thai, Vietnamese, Cham, Burmese, Japanese and other stoneware glazed vessels found in Southeast Asian shipwrecks ranging from the 9th to the 17th century found in abundance, but no Khmer/Cambodian wares? Khmer technologies were certainly as sophisticated, advanced and as highly appreciated (at least locally) with massive production capacity, but they were seemingly never pushed out (that is, exported). The same distribution parallels terrestrial sites from Myanmar to New Guinea. Why? Why are the Thai and Vietnamese wares so highly abundant in the 15th and 16th centuries? Does this tell us something about policy, business and entrepreneurial cultures at that time? Certainly. The 'Ming Gap(s)' tell us something about policy and distribution – the Thai and Vietnamese in particular took advantage of regional demand while the Chinese curtailed export. Were the Khmer uninterested in regional entrepreneurship at the time? Was this part of the Angkorian decline and do pot shards help us understand this? What can this tell us about the need for regional entrepreneurship in changing economies in the 21st century?

Thus, I leave you with many questions. The challenge – what other questions can you consider and how will pot shards help? I've been doing archaeology and pottery analysis for 30 years, but I find non-archaeologists also have a lot to offer archaeologists through their questions. No question is dumb. Just ask. Also, ask your friends and have them ask you, the next time you visit a museum.



Shards of one of China's most famous ceramics - ruware. Photo courtesy of Patricia Bjaaland Welch

Kyle David Latinis grew up in Kansas City and, inspired by Asian history and culture, now has two advanced degrees, a PhD in anthropology and another in Southeast Asian Studies. His other interest is in archaeology. He is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

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