



Jar, compressed globular form

On display

Title/Description: Jar, compressed globular form

Object Type: Vessel

Materials: Earthenware

Technique: wheel-thrown

Measurements: h. 211 x w. 185 x d. 166 mm

Accession Number: 1162

Historic Period: Neolithic cultures (c. 2000 BC)

Production Place: Asia, China, Longshan

Cultural Group: Longshan

This is an example of black pottery produced in sites associated with “Longshan culture” that flourished in northeast China during the third millennium BCE. [1] Longshan culture was a late Neolithic culture concentrated in the middle and lower Yellow River (Ch. Huanghe) valley areas of Northern China. It is thought that this vessel was produced in the formative Shandong period. [2] A small proportion of Longshan pottery is black, with a highly polished surface and extremely thin walls that give it the name ‘eggshell’ pottery. The exceptional quality and sophistication of Longshan black pottery was made technically possible by the culture’s development of fast-turning pottery wheels.

This light-weight jar has a compressed globular form and was probably thrown in two sections and joined before firing to give a composite form. Lugs have been attached to the jar, possibly for cords, suggesting that the vessel may have been suspended or worn.

The glossy black character of this ceramic is a result of burnishing and a specific method of firing, which required a reduced (oxygen starved) atmosphere within the kiln. The remains of a vertical kiln found at Miaodigou, dating from the Longshan period, is constructed of a combustion chamber connected to the oven by a narrow flue. Heat from the oven entered the sealed chamber through small vents positioned at the bottom of the chamber. [3] The iron oxide content of the clay resulted in a grey coloured body, and carbonisation during the firing turned the surface of the earthenware black.

Longshan black pottery has been excavated from Longshan settlements and elite burial sites, miraculously surviving to the present day. It is debated whether the labour-intensive production of ‘eggshell’ pottery from this period was made for displays of status in habitation contexts as well as for mortuary rituals. [4] Because Longshan black pottery has not been found in the debris of residential areas in Shandong, it is likely that this pottery symbolised high social status and may have been used as real or symbolic vessels in mortuary rituals. [5] Egg-shell pottery was probably exported and used in exchanges with neighbouring regions for prestige goods, such as jades. [6]

- [1] “Longshan culture” refers to three synchronous phases named after geographical locations (Shandong, Henan-Hebei, and Shaanxi-Longshan). During this period, an agricultural patriarchal society was established that practiced nature worship and divination using animal bones. He Li, *Chinese Ceramics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), p. 23.
- [2] Liu Li, ‘Mortuary Ritual and Social Hierarchy in the Longshan Culture’, *Early China*, 1996, vol. 21 (1996), pp. 1-46 (p. 7; Fig. 1).
- [3] He Li, p. 24.
- [4] Anne P. Underhill, ‘Variations in Settlements during the Longshan Period of Northern China’, *Asian Perspectives*, Fall 1994, vol. 33, no. 2, *Special Issue: Regional Perspectives on States in Asia* (Fall 1994), pp. 197-228 (p. 213).
- [5] Liu Li, p. 19.
- [6] Liu Li, p. 11.
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Further Reading

- Li, He, *Chinese Ceramics* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996)
- Li, Liu, ‘Mortuary Ritual and Social Hierarchy in the Longshan Culture’, *Early China*, 1996, vol. 21 (1996), pp. 1-46.
- Rawson, Jessica (ed), *The British Museum Book of Chinese Art* (London: The British Museum Press, 2007)
- Underhill, Anne P., ‘Variations in Settlements during the Longshan Period of Northern China’, *Asian Perspectives*, Fall 1994, vol. 33, no. 2, *Special Issue: Regional Perspectives on States in Asia* (Fall 1994), pp. 197-228.
- Zhimin, An ‘Archaeological Research on Neolithic China’, *Current Anthropology*, Dec. 1988, vol. 29, no. 5 (Dec. 1988), pp. 753-759.
- Zhimin, An and K. C. Chang, ‘The Neolithic Archaeology of China A Brief Survey of the Last Thirty Years’ from Early China, 1979-80, vol. 5 (1979-80), pp. 35-45.
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