



Longshan vessel

On display

Title/Description: Longshan vessel

Object Type: Vessel

Materials: Clay, Earthenware

Technique: wheel-thrown

Accession Number: 1361

Production Place: Asia, China

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 vessel, known as an 'egg-shell pottery goblet' (Ch. *dange taobei*), was probably thrown in three sections and joined before firing to give a composite form. The bulbous stem of the vessel is perforated with vertical slits. Pierced decoration is the only form of embellishment found on this type of ware and is used to make the vessel appear even more delicate and refined.

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]

'The likelihood that the egg-shell pottery goblets were used for drinking is indicated by their high-stemmed form; their occurrence mostly in rich burials suggests that the goblets were used mainly by elites in drinking rituals (including the mortuary ceremony), and were placed in burials as symbols of the high social status of both deceased and mourners.' [6]

Egg-shell pottery was probably exported and used in exchanges with neighbouring regions for prestige goods, such as jades. [7] This piece suffered a breakage in Lady Sainsbury's Dulwich home around 1999-2000 and was repaired by conservators at the British Museum. It was returned to the Sainsbury Centre in 2020. [8]

Vanessa Tothill, February 2022

[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. 12.

[7] Liu Li, p. 11.

[8] Email correspondence with Rosina Buckland, British Museum, 13 November 2020.

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.

Provenance

Bequest from Lady Sainsbury, 2014
