

On Akan Ceramics and the State of the Asante

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This poster details the ceramics of the Asante State, based on results of the Asante Archaeological Research Project, research carried out under the direction of Peter Shinnie. Although historically much attention was directed toward the Asante State and the ceramics produced therein, in more recent times the Asante have in large been ignored archaeologically and little is known about the nature of ceramics from the area. Analysis of the vessel and rim forms identified indicates how Akan Ceramics developed well before the emergence of the Asante State.



The ceramic crafts of the Asante have attracted visitor's attention for well over a century (Plate 1). The highly lustrous shiny black wares of the Asante, characterized by sharp features, heavily carinated shoulders and elaborately moulded rims particularly caught the attention of colonial administrators and modern researchers alike. While earlier finds indicate that there has been a marked shift in the style of ceramics produced, little is known of the chronological development of classic Asante ceramics and when these baroque pot forms came into being.



Plate 1: Historic photo of Asante ceramics.

From 1984 to 1995 The Asante Archaeological Project under the direction of Prof. Peter Shinnie excavated four village sites which oral traditions suggest are all closely linked with the origins of the Asante Kingdom (Shinnie and Shinnie 1990, Shinnie and Vivian 1991, Vivian 1990). Radiocarbon dates indicate the age of these sites range in age between 400 and 1000 years old.



Plate 2: Excavations at Asantemanso.

Excavations resulted in the recovery of whole pots and some 297,000 pot sherds (Plates 3, 4 and 5). Analysis of this ceramic assemblage focused on identifying ware-types, defining specific rim forms, and documenting the variation in vessel form in order to clarify how the unique ceramic forms of the Asante Kingdom were developed.



Plate 4: Sherds and complete pots found at Anyinam.



Plate 3: Mapping a concentration of pots at Asantemanso.

Whole pots were classified according to their form as Cups, Bowls and Jars. Small cups were particularly common place in earlier times, but disappear after ca. 1700 (Plates 6 and 7). Typically decorated with an incised line, these plain ware cups are similar in size and form to those used for serving palm wine, a function gourds are now used for.



Plate 6: Cluster of cups found at Asantemanso.



Plate 7: Open cup with incised decoration.

Ceramic bowls noticeably increase in volume and size from the smaller shallow flaring bowl forms prevalent in earlier assemblages to deeper open bowl forms found in later historic assemblages. Nearly always burnished black these larger bowls are nearly identical to the modern bowls called *Apotoyowa*, which are often used today for grinding (Plates 8, 9 and 10).

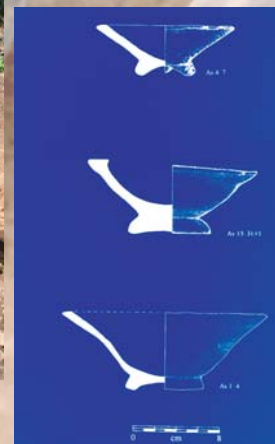


Plate 8: Open triangular bowls.

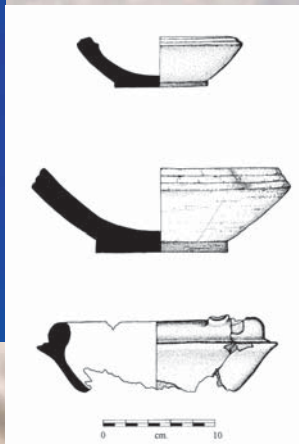


Plate 9: Open round bowls.



Plate 10: Modern day manufacture of Apotoyowa grinding bowls.

Other more elaborate forms of Pot Stands, Lids and Large Open Jars were reasoned to have more specialized ceremonial functions. Although less commonly found, these more ornate vessels are characterized by heavy ornate rims and sharply carinated shoulders with thick boss or lugs attached (Plate 12). Typically burnished black these vessels are nearly identical to the historic wares of the Asante Kingdom, even though use of them dates back 500-600 years before the Asante Kingdom was established in AD 1700.

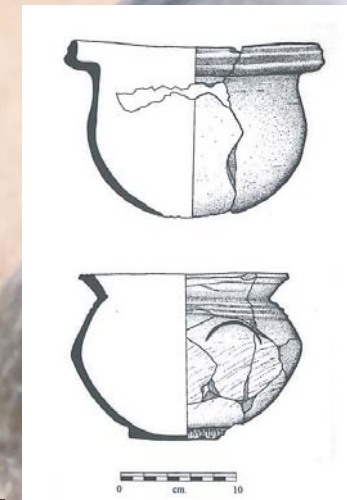


Plate 11: Open utilitarian jars.

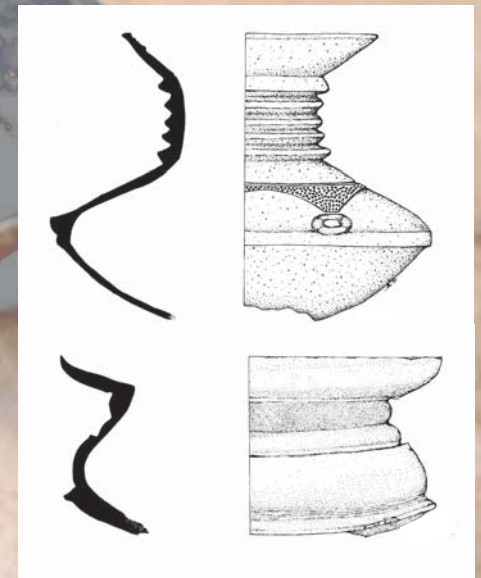


Plate 12: Large ceremonial jars.

CONCLUSIONS

The lustrous black wares and pot forms which typify the historic Asante are found in contexts dating over 800 years old. The continuity of these distinctive forms indicates the Akan people have resided within the forests of Southern Ghana for the last thousand years. The continued use of ceremonial vessels further indicates a culture of prestige and status emerged among the Akan well before the Asante Kingdom was established in 1700. Observed changes in bowls may relate to the growing importance of individual status in later times. The disappearance of smaller clay cups is thought to mark a period when gourds appeared as an import item from the north, indicative of growing regional trade patterns.



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