The prehistory of pottery restoration

In recent years there has been an increasing professional interest in the history of pottery repairs. Restorers and archaeologists alike have begun to study the restorations carried out during earlier life stages of the objects placed in their hands. These physical modifications attest to the complex biographies of the artefacts. Every professional restorer will be familiar with earlier repairs made in the past centuries, and many have come across more ancient examples from the classical past. However, archaeology shows that the history of pottery repairs has a much more ancient pedigree.

Excavations at archaeological sites in the Near East are bringing to light what may well be the oldest pottery repairs from the Old World. In the Fertile Crescent, pottery first appears around 7000-6900 B.C. in what are today south-eastern Turkey, northern Syria and northern Iraq. Soon after the first introduction of containers made in fired clay, various techniques for repairing them are attested in the archaeological record. Two main early techniques are plastering damaged vessels with lime/gypsum, and fitting broken pieces together using perforations, string and glues.

The earliest examples of restored pottery vessels were treated with plaster made from lime or gypsum (the chemical distinction between these two raw materials is difficult to identify in the field).

In some instances, the potter covered the cracks with a layer of plaster. In other instances, gaps in the wall were filled with plaster. Plaster was a material very commonly used by prehistoric communities at this time, for covering floors and walls of houses, and for producing large waterproof containers, so the choice of this material for repairing broken pottery vessels is perhaps not surprising.

Fig. 1. A coarse ceramic vessel from Tell Sabi Abyad. A large crack was repaired by covering it with plaster. Early Pottery Neolithic period, ca. 6600 BC. Height of vessel ca. 50 cm. (Source: National Museum of Antiquities Leiden).
The second technique, which appears at about the same time, would remain the most common solution for repairing pottery vessels throughout prehistory. Perforations were placed on either side of the break, after which the fragments were kept together with a piece of string or rope. Occasionally, traces of dark bitumen used as an adhesive are still visible on the breaks. This method may have been adopted from the restoration of stone vessels. Excavations at Tell Sabi Abyad in northern Syria have yielded some fine examples of broken vessels made in stone and pottery repaired this way.
Finds such as these are not just interesting because they document the history of specific technologies for repairing artefacts. They can also inform us about the social meaning of these objects. Here the archaeological context is key. The presence or absence of repairs in specific time periods or at specific sites, the association of particular types of repairs with specific artefacts, or even the distribution of broken fragments across the archaeological sites: these are issues archaeologists have been trained to investigate.

Of course, in order to enable the study of pottery restoration technologies in prehistory and the socio-economic meaning of ancient repairs, it is essential that these are systematically reported in archaeological find reports. This has not always been self-evident. Pottery repairs have for long been virtually neglected in archaeology. This is now changing, as is shown by a range of new publications and specialized symposiums. The ICOM-CC would be the ideal platform to stimulate this discussion and to bring together evidence from a variety of professional perspectives and specializations. As a professional archaeologist working with early ceramic assemblages from the Near East, my awareness of the potential of prehistoric pottery repairs has been growing over the past years. I would be very interested in discussing the issue of prehistoric pottery repairs with colleagues working with similar materials from other parts of the world, be they trained as archaeologists or pottery restorers.

Selected references


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