

Chinese pottery may be earliest discovered

June 2 2009, By RANDOLPH E. SCHMID , AP Science Writer

(AP) -- Bits of pottery discovered in a cave in southern China may be evidence of the earliest development of ceramics by ancient people.

The find in Yuchanyan Cave dates to as much as 18,000 years ago, researchers report in Tuesday's edition of [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#).

The find "supports the proposal made in the past that pottery making by foragers began in south China," according to the researchers, led by Elisabetta Boaretto of Bar Ilan University in Israel.

The pottery found at Yuchanyan "is the earliest so far," Boaretto said.

Pottery was one of the first human-made materials and tracing its origins and development opens a window on the development of culture, said Tracey Lu, an [anthropologist](#) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who was not part of Boaretto's team.

"Pottery initially serves as a cooking and storage facility. Later on, some pottery vessels become symbols of power and social status, as well as examples of art," Lu said. "Pottery is still an important part of human culture today."

Lu noted that the dates reported in this paper "are slightly older than the dates (of pottery found) in Japan. However, the accuracy of radiocarbon dates in the limestone area has been under debate for many years."

"I agree that pottery was made by foragers in South China, but I also think pottery was produced more or less contemporaneously in several places in East Asia ... from Russia, Japan to North and South China by foragers living in different environments," Lu added.

Boaretto, however, contends that "the importance of this study is the high precision dating, the systematic dating of the whole cave, to exclude mixing or intrusion of materials from above layers and the very detailed dating of the strata around the new pottery."

"This sets Yuchanyan as the earliest site where pottery has been made," she said. "We do not know if the technology moved from China to the other sites, but this hypothesis is stronger now than before."

Patrick E. McGovern, an anthropologist at the University of Pennsylvania, noted that figurines have been found in what is now the Czech Republic that go back as far as 35,000 years. But those were not actual pottery vessels, he said.

"I had long thought that Japan would be the earliest," McGovern said, but in researching his forthcoming book on the history of alcoholic drinks, "Uncorking the Past," he found evidence of development of ancient drinks in China. "China has a lot of very early remains," he said, "so why not pottery."

This report "firms up that evidence for [China](#)," as the home of the earliest pottery yet found, he said, though there does seem to be a long gap between the Czech figurines and the Chinese pottery.

"It makes you wonder what was going on," McGovern said.

Boaretto's research was funded by the Peabody Museum of Harvard University, Hunan Provincial Institute of Archaeology and Cultural

Relics and the Weizmann Institute of Science in Israel.

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