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The earliest pottery of the eastern part of Asia: Similarities and differences

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ABSTRACT

There are many reasons why the earliest pottery of East Asia is so interesting for researchers. One of them is that it is a unique source for reconstruction of cultural diversity within Late Pleistocene. According to Russian archaeologists, for such reconstruction it is necessary to find out how pots were made (clay paste composition, way of shaping, surface treatment, firing and decorating) and how pots looked. Based on this perspective it is possible to divide the earliest ceramic assemblages of East Asia into three groups. First of them include the Incipient Jomon ones, their differentia is plain (without rough surface treatment) pottery ornamented by hands (pinch, nail impression, clay application) and a comparatively high level of unification. Second group comprises Osipovka assemblages compactly located within the Low Amur river basin. They are quite polymorphous but have common distinctive traits such as grog temper, comb design of different pattern and combing surface treatment. The third group is the most extended and diverse. Its key feature is only cord surface treatment in a very special manner of rolling of a cord wrapped stick. Astoundingly, the assemblages with this trait occupy the territory from southernmost China to Transbaikalia (Studenoe-1, Ust-Karenga), and Middle Amur river basin (Gromatukha). So, it is possible to say they have Inner-Asia spatial distribution. Thus, we can see three different areas of spatial distribution of earliest ceramic assemblages within the eastern part of Asia. Tracking their Holocene fate, we can find confirmation of such conclusion and suppose that Sakhalin, North Hokkaido and Russia Maritime form the forth – non-ceramic – area in Late Pleistocene.

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1. Introduction

The earliest ceramics of East Asia have been a major object of archaeological research of the past twenty years. There are many reasons why it is so interesting for researchers, but the most important one is that these findings have greatly modified our previous belief about the Neolithic and the Paleolithic-Neolithic transition (Barnett and Hoopes, 1995; Jourdan and Zvelebil, 2009; Gibbs and Jourdan, 2013, 2016). So most of the main topics of current publications have been and remain the matters of chronology and the relation between pottery development and the environmental conditions, development of lithic industries and the general process of cultural transformation (Kajiwara and Kononenko, 1999; Keally et al., 2003; Wu and Zhao, 2003; Cohen, 2003, 2013; Cohen et al., 2016; Kuzmin and Shewkomud, 2003; Pearson, 2005, 2006; Kuzmin, 2006, 2010, 2015; Elston et al., 2011; Nakazawa et al., 2011; Dikshit and Hazarika, 2012; Shelach,

2012; Liu and Chen, 2012; Sato et al., 2015; Tsydenova and Piezonka, 2015; Buvit et al., 2016, etc.).

But there are other interesting aspects of this subject as well. One of them is that the earliest ceramics are possible a unique source for the study of cultural diversity within the Late Pleistocene age. But, this subject draws little scientific attention and as a result the earliest pottery *per se* is almost absent in English-language publications: we know virtually nothing about its morphology, technology, context, etc. To be sure, these data can be obtained from national publications, though not always, but the access to them is very limited due to the linguistic and political barriers.

There is also another side of this problem. We do not even know how suitable the earliest ceramics are to solve many tasks that are typical to ceramic studies of later epochs or whether they have any specificity as a source. Moreover, many key aspects of the origin of pottery cannot be comprehended without these data, for instance, whether this process was poly- or uncentric, what regions were primary centers of this process, how and why pottery was invented and so on. Only well documented ceramic collections can be used as

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an evidence base in such studies.

This paper presents the results of the author's long-term research aimed at the reconstruction of different aspects of earliest pottery-making development in the Sea of Japan basin and on adjacent territories (Yanshina, 2008, 2011; 2014; Yanshina and Lapshina, 2008; Yanshina and Garkovik, 2009; Shewkomud and Yanshina, 2010b; Yanshina et al., 2012; Shewkomud and Yanshina, 2012; Yanshina, 2014; Razgildeeva et al., 2013; Yanshina and Kuzmin, 2010). Within the framework of the project, pottery collections from all regions of East Asia were compared tentatively, and results came out to be interesting. For example, it appears that by the end of Pleistocene several distinct pottery-making traditions had been already formed there, and each of them had its own more or less compact distribution area. But the most interesting fact is that these areas preserved their own peculiarity in later epochs as well. Some of the observations, which confirm these conclusions, will be given further.

2. Materials and methods

In the first place, the comparative analysis of the early ceramic assemblages of East Asia definitely requires to synchronize the processes of their development in different regions. But this is a big problem. I know of only one attempt to solve it (Jordan and Zvelebil, 2009). The authors offer to separate a process of ceramic development in East Asia into four stages (see Fig. 1B). Their model is based mainly on the following two grounds: spatial dispersal of pottery and a measure of how deep pottery was embedded in the culture. However, it appears that the latter was evaluated in the model not on the ground of archaeological records directly but rather on the base of expectations originated from the anthropological theory.

Virtually, archaeological data currently allow us to separate the East Asia pottery-making development into three stages only: (1) the formative period which is associated with the emergence of the first pottery; (2) the transitional period associated with the disappearance or transformation of ceramic traditions of a previous epoch; (3) the classic period of the Neolithic when ceramics appear everywhere (this epoch was formerly named by scholars as the early Neolithic) (see Fig. 1A). Various regions were differently engaged in this process: some of them progressed faster, others were left behind. Accordingly, in some of regions the boundaries of these stages could be somewhat displaced, but the main stages of pottery-making development are as given above.

To substantiate this scheme, I need much more place, but if we compare my model with Jordan and Zvelebil's one, we can see that the first and the last stages of both models coincide roughly (see Fig. 1B), whereas the intermediate step differentiates our schemes. Nevertheless, this step is very elusive and short-term. In most of regions, especially northern ones, it coincides with a break in archaeological records, and the nature of the break is inexplicit. As there are too little data to understand what kinds of processes took place in East Asia during this time interval, I prefer to designate it as one transitional step.

This paper draws attention to the sites of the formative period, which coincided with the last millenniums of terminal Pleistocene epoch. Pottery collections of Incipient Jōmon and Osipovka cultures from Japan (Keally et al., 2003; Kudo, 2004; Kobayashi, 2008a) and the Lower Amur River (Shewkomud and Yanshina, 2010a; Kuzmin, 2010; Kunikita et al., 2014) correspondingly can be undoubtedly referred to this period. In the Middle Amur and Transbaikalia ceramics emerged somewhat later but they also fall within this period (Vetrov and Kuzmin, 2007; Kuzmin and Nesterov, 2010; Razgildeeva et al., 2013). As for China, situation is more complex. According to the recent studies, pottery appeared in the South

China two-three thousand years earlier than elsewhere (Boaretto et al., 2009; Wu et al., 2012; Taylor and Bar-Yosef, 2014). But their dating still remains very controversial (Lu, 2010; Cohen, 2013; Kuzmin, 2013). Not being able to go into a more detailed analysis here, I will view the materials from South China as synchronous to the materials of the Lower Amur and Japan. Unfortunately, I had to exclude the earliest pottery from the North China from the analysis, because it still remains absolutely unclear to me and its age as well. All sites involved in this study are presented in Fig. 2.

The sites of the Japanese archipelago and the Lower Amur are more researched. Many sites were discovered in these regions. Therefore, it is possible to define there well-established and stable ceramic traditions, outline their dynamics and trace their further destiny. It is interesting that these ceramic traditions lived on throughout the formative period and kept their wholeness and originality. It was only in the outset of Holocene that they started to disintegrate and be replaced by other ceramic traditions. In this respect, the materials from Transbaikalia, the Middle Amur and China are distinctly different. Ceramic complexes are few in number here, and relying on the available data, it is not possible to trace any lines of pottery-making development among them.

The basic units of my work are 'vessel – vessels assemblage (set of ceramics deposited at the same time) – ceramic tradition'. Here, ceramic tradition is understood as a set of potter's choices which lead to the production of pottery with a specific combination of stylistic and technical attributes. Stability and repetition of these attributes from vessel to vessel and from one complex to another served as a necessary prerequisite for singling out a ceramic tradition.

The distinctive feature of this research is its immense data set. Pottery assemblages from various sites and regions are studied to a different degree and vary in their level of accessibility for analysis. So, when I compared them, I was forced to use the only available and reliable data. For this reason, a comprehensive description of each ceramic collections involved in this study was impossible, and a range of attributes used for distinguishing a different ceramic traditions, wasn't stable and depended on the characteristics of each individual case. It is a good thing that most of the Russian collections and many of the Japanese ones I could observe directly in the course of my project (these collection are marked as bold on Fig. 2). In other cases I had to rely on published data.

The limited format of the journal's publication doesn't allow to present a detailed description of all ceramic collections and to offer their thorough evidence-based comparison. That's why the main focus of the paper will be on those attributes that form the specific nature of each pottery-making tradition and those ones that link different ceramic traditions to each other.

3. Results

3.1. The Lower Amur River Basin

The most famous sites of Osipovka culture are Gasya (Okladnikov and Medvedev, 1983; Medvedev, 1995), Khummy (Lapshina, 1995, 1998; 1999) and Goncharka (Shewkomud, 1996, 1997). Materials from these sites were the first to be introduced to archaeological science and that's why they are more represented in English-language publications (Derevyanko and Medvedev, 1995, 2006; Zhushchikhovskaya, 1997, 2001; 2005; Kuzmin, 2003, etc). Over the recent years, however, a series of new sites have been excavated, and they allow to refine our knowledge about osipovsky pottery-making (Shewkomud and Kuzmin, 2009; Shewkomud and Yanshina, 2010a; 2012; Yanshina and Lapshina, 2008; Malyavin, 2008; Medvedev and Tsetlin, 2013; Fukuda et al., 2014). Attributes which form the particularity of osipovsky ceramic tradition

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