



Tripod vessel

On display

Title/Description: Tripod vessel

Born: 1100 c. BC - 0900 . BC

Object Type: Vessel

Materials: Earthenware

Measurements: h. 184 x w. 190 x d. 190 mm

Accession Number: 285

Historic Period: Shang (late)/Western Zhou (early) dynasty (11th-10th century BC)

Production Place: Asia, China

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This tripod vessel (Zi) is divided into three lobes which taper to small feet. The body is patterned with cord-impressed markings and has a neatly everted lip. Some pots of this kind were made by moulding, and as such are one of the important technical developments of ancient China. The first lobe was probably made over a stone or similar object and then the other lobes were moulded from the first one. In this way new pots could be generated by moulding the lobes off earlier ones and then joining them together; small pointed legs were then added and a neck was joined to the body. On this piece the difference in thickness of the clay of the cord-marked lobes, the pointed feet and the smooth neck indicates that it was probably made in parts. Alternatively, such *li* could be made by taking a wide tube of clay and cutting three slits in it. Each third could be then folded and joined to itself to make a pocket-shaped leg. A separate lip might be added at the top. Such multiple construction, with moulding sometimes used as part of the process, is typical of the complexity of many Chinese industries. Even at a very early period, the Chinese did not balk at making things in many parts and joining them together. Perhaps at this stage, too, they developed the notion of using several craftsmen to contribute to individual pieces. In due course, mass production was born, and for this reason also, perhaps, master craftsmen and master potters never seem to have been important in China.

Tripod vessels were developed for cooking over low fires; the lobed form allowed a greater surface area to be heated than would have been possible, for instance, with a shallow bowl standing on three little feet. This latter type was also used, and developed into a different kind of typical ceramic artefact. Both forms were later copied in bronze from the Shang period onwards, and represent two important types of food vessel used in the ritual set for offering banquets to ancestors. Together with the bronzes, ceramics continued to be used, particularly as cooking pots. This vessel was probably one such utilitarian piece buried in a tomb, perhaps with several bronzes, as part of the ritual set to be used by the dead occupant, who would have to continue offering such banquets to his ancestors (see previous entry).

Tripod vessels are among the salient characteristics of the Chinese ceramic industry from the neolithic period (c. 8000-2000 bc) onwards. They were especially characteristic of east-coast neolithic cultures, occurring in the Majiabang and Songze cultures south of Shanghai and the Qingliangang and Dawenkou cultures further north. From the east coast, they spread into much of central and even western China during the latter part of the third millennium (Chang, 1977: 80-184). Examples of tripod pots from all stages of the Shang are known (*Kaogu xuebao*, 1979.1: 63, fig. 48), when they were very popular in Shaanxi province, the home-land of the Zhou who were to succeed the Shang (*Kaogu xuebao*, 1989.1:1-23). Stages of cultural development in Shaanxi prior to the Zhou conquest of the Shang are defined in terms of different *li* types (*Kaogu yu wenwu*, 1982.1:69-74, 93; *Wenwu*, 1979.10:30-39; *Wenwu*, 1984.7: 42-9). There are two principal types: vessels with gourd-shaped lobes and vessels with arched legs, as here. Examples of the latter have been found at Zhangjiapo near Chang'an in Shaanxi (*Kaogu xuebao*, 1980.4: 457-502, fig. 19:4) and at Baicaopo at Lingtai in Gansu province (*Kaogu xuebao*, 1977.2:99-130, pl. 15:2). This last vessel dates to the early tenth century and closely resembles the present one.

Jessica Rawson, 1997 (China)

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1941. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
