Pre-Historic Pottery: The Physical Analysis Peninsular Malaysia

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The earliest recorded archaeological research in Malaysia was conduction by L. Wray, the first Curator of the Perak Museum, between 1880 and 1891. He investigated a rock shelter in the limestone hills near Ipoh in the state of Perak (Wray 1897: 45). These pioneer efforts, however, did not produce any ceramics and were, therefore, not relevant to our subject.

The first excavations to reveal pottery shards as well as traces of ancient occupation were conducted by I.H.N. Evans in caves and rock shelters at Lenggong and Batu Kurau in Perak, Kota Tongkat and Gunong Senyum in Pahang, between 1926 and 1927. Evans sometimes worked in collaboration with P.V. Van Stein Callenfels, who continued the excavation of Gua Kerbau in the limestone massive of Gunong Pondok in Perak, started by W.M. Gordon in 1921.

Whole pottery vessels were first discovered by H.D. Noone in a rock shelter at Gua Cha, Kelantan, which has become one of the most important archaeological sites in the country (Noone 1939). Further excavations were carried out between 1936 and 1939 by H.D. Collings, W.W.F. Tweedie, H.D. Noone, and P.V. Van Stein Callenfels in caves and rock shelters in Perlis, Kedah, and Perak on the west coast, and in Kelantan and Pahang on the east coast. This work added more information to the existing knowledge of prehistoric pottery. B.A.V. Peacock (1959) published the first account of pottery found in excavations in peninsular Malaysia.

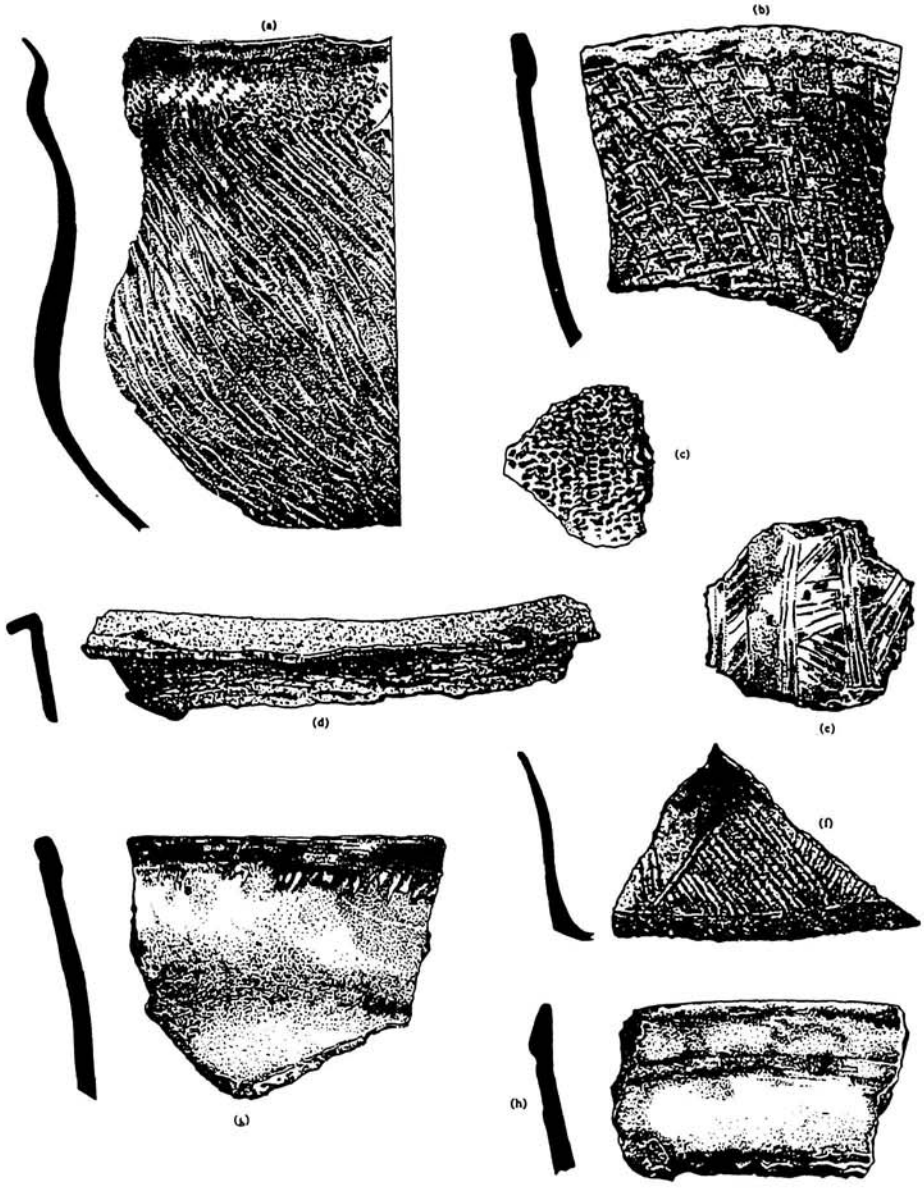
Archaeological research on pottery continued to develop and, in 1953, P.D.R. Williams-Hunt discovered Bukit Tengku Lembu in Perlis, which is an important site that yielded quantities of pottery and more shapes than previously known (Sieveking 1962). Another advance in research came at about the same time and resulted in the discovery of pottery cones at Bukit Keplu in Kodiang, Kedah. This form is generally referred to as the 'Kodiang tripod.'

Other sites, besides caves and rock shelters, figured in the recording of pottery found at Malaysian Prehistoric sites and include the settlement of Nyong on the banks of the Tembeling River in Pahang (Evans 1931), Jenderam Hilir, Dengkil, Selangor (Batchelor 1977; Leong Sau Heng 1977, 1992), the graves built of stone and iron implements found at Perak and Selangor (Evans 1928a and 1931c; Collings 1937a) and the site of Tanjong Rawa in the mangrove swamp of Kuala Selinsing in Perak (Evans 1932).

Prehistoric Pottery

Complete vessels have been recovered from several sites dating to the Stone Age and include the states of Kelantan, Perak, Kedah, Perlis, and Selangor. Pottery in Metal Age sites was found in a slab-built grave in the Bernam Valley and at Sungai Lang, in Banting.

Kelangan Two main sites are described: Gua Cha and Gua Musang. A rock shelter at Gua Cha situated in an isolated limestone outcrop on the west bank



Jenderam Hilir, Dengkil, Selangor

Variously decorated pottery sherd types:

a) Obliquely cord-impressed bowl with comb-impressed rim shoulder
b) Coarse reticulate groove pattern
c) Negatively impressed 'turtleware' pattern
d) Wide diameter vessel with overhanging lip
e - f) Geometric patterns
g - h) Developed rim forms

of the Neggiri River produced a range of pottery. The dimensions of the shelter are: length = 100 m; height = 10 m. In 1935, H.D. Noone dug two trial trenches that yielded two human burials and at least eight whole pottery vessels, which were the first to be found in Peninsular Malaysia. It is believed they were used as grave furniture and buried with the deceased. The site was revisited in 1951 by Williams-Hunt and again in 1954 by G. de G. Sieveking, who excavated the main part of the shelter to a depth where no further finds were made. The site was excavated again in 1979 by Adi Hj. Taha for his M.A. thesis, completed in 1985.

The Ceramics

A large number of whole pots in good condition in addition to quantities of shards were recovered. Many were excavated in association with burials of the Neolithic period; others were votive deposits and found in isolated 'nest' alignment. Based on the material excavated from the Gua Cha site, Sieveking was able to identify a stage of ceramic development which he divided into two groups: (1) A 'Primitive Tradition' with irregular shapes and rough, hand-formed pots. Poor firing was also a characteristic of this group; (2) An 'Advanced Neolithic Tradition' with more sophisticated pots that were skilfully made and elaborately decorated. The main method of production was to turn the pots slowly on a wheel. Additional shapes were carinated and footed vessels.

The two groups corresponded to the levels of the Neolithic period already known and provided the first evidence of a chronological sequence in ceramics from Peninsular Malaysia sites.

Gua Musang District

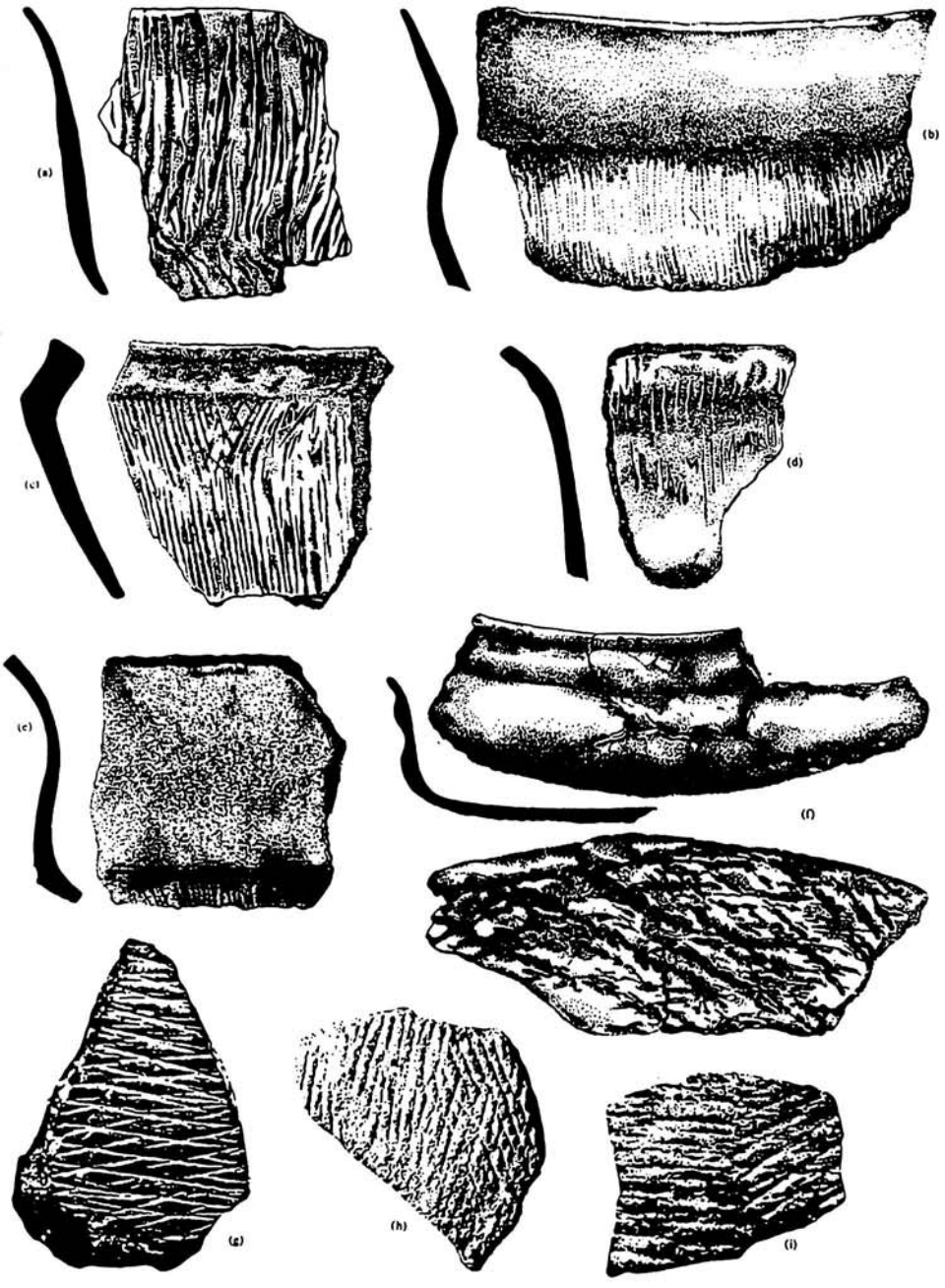
A number of caves and a rock shelter (Gua Madu) bearing traces of prehistoric human occupation were discovered by M.W.F. Tweedie in 1939 when he conducted a survey in the region of Gua Musang. The rock shelter yielded quantities of ceramic shards and enabled the reconstruction of two vessels.

Lenggong District

A series of excavations on rock shelters were conducted at Batu Kurau and Lenggong in 1917 by Evan and Callenfels (Evan 1918; 1920a). The same two archaeologists excavated Lenggong (in Gua Kerbau) again and the Gunong Pondon between 1920 and 1927 (Evan 1922; Callenfels and Evan 1928; Evan 1928). Callenfels and H.D. Noone conducted further investigations at Gua Baik (near Sungai Siput) between 1934 and 1939 (Callenfels and Noone 1940). None of these excavations produced any whole vessels. Fragments, though, found by Evan at Gua Kajang during his first excavation at Lenggong enabled the reconstruction of a footed vessel. The shards at Gua Kajang were found within 30 cm of the surface. Some years later, in 1950, Williams Hunt visited several sites in the Lenggong district and collected a few whole vessels and some fragments that enabled the reconstruction of vessels.

Gua Berhala, Kodiang, Kedah

This site comprises a limestone outcrop, Bukit Keplu, located near the village of Kodiang on the border between Kedah and Perlis. When Evan surveyed the site in 1929, the name was Gua To'Pan (Evan 1931a). At that time the deposits were in the process of being removed for use as fertilizer on an adjacent rice field. Evan found a few shards of cord-marked pottery at the site. Further work was conducted by Williams Hunt (1952) and, although little remained of the original floor of the shelter, he succeeded in recovering numerous shards of pottery from the debris, and some curious conical-shaped pottery objects with a hollow interior and decorated on the exterior with cord-marking; two holes were pierced



Jenderam Hilir, Dengkil, Selangor

Cord impressed pottery sherd types:

a - d) Rims with 'parallel' ornamentation
e - I) Sherds with 'crisscross' ornamentation.

in the objects, one near the broad end and another near the point. The shards retrieved from the site were classified into four groups: (1) a large and deep carinated bowl; (2) a shallower bowl with an everted rim; (3) a bowl similar to the previous one but without a lip; and (4) a simple vessel without a lip or defined rim. The vessels in all four groups were decorated with cord-marking on the exterior and polished on the interior. The exterior surface of the rims of groups one through three was also polished. The surface colour ranged from light, reddish brown to dark brown.

The function of the conical-shaped objects was puzzling. Some ideas put forth included their use as incense burners but Sieveking (1956) discarded this theory on the basis that none of the objects had traces of the resinous soot which would normally have been present in such a function. His idea was that the conical-shaped cones were placed in the ground, with the pointed end downward, for use as a support for pots during manufacturing, either while drying in the sun or for applying decoration. Williams Hunt suggested, they may have had a ritual significance, possibly in association with Buddhism. A shard of carinated form, like those from Gua Berhala, was later found at a nearby site, Bintong, Perlis, and seems to have a function close to the theory put forth by Sieveking. A particular type of tripod vessel was also found at Binton, but its function was unknown.

Pulau Tuba, Langkawi Islands

A large jar was found in 1924 on the floor of a small cave on Pulau Tuba, one of the Langkawi group of islands. A low, narrow entrance to the cave made it necessary to crawl on one's hands and knees to gain access to the chamber (width = 8-10 m). The jar is decorated with an irregular pattern created by a cord-wrapped beater. The body, though unusually thin, was potted from the poorest quality of sand in the area.

Bukit Tengku Lembu, Perlis

A rock shelter, Bukit Tengku Lembu, was the second site after the discoveries by Noon at Gua Cha, Kelantan, and yielded a rich collection of Neolithic pottery (Williams Hunt 1952). The finds included whole vessels and numerous shards that were easily reconstructed into vessels. Regrettably, the site was mainly looted by illegal diggers before proper archaeological excavation could take place. Nevertheless, Williams-Hunt managed to salvage a large number of shards, a small selection of fine-quality polished stone implements, an antler gouge, some human skeletal materials and, most important, a large number of whole vessels, which suffered some damage during recovery.

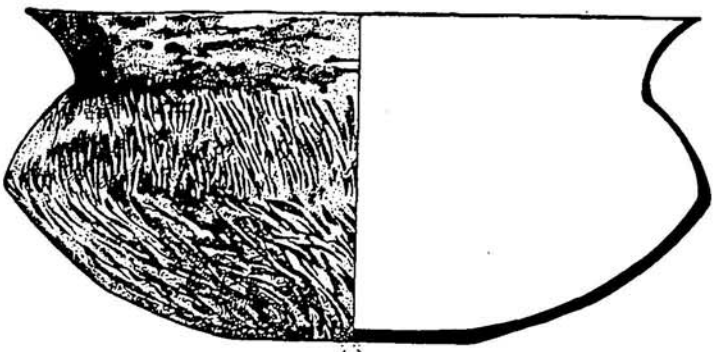
Technique of Manufacture

The Slow Wheel A general impression of the collection is a high degree of technical skill and sophisticated decoration. Both of these characteristics were undoubtedly due to the widespread use of a type of wheel for forming and finishing the pottery.

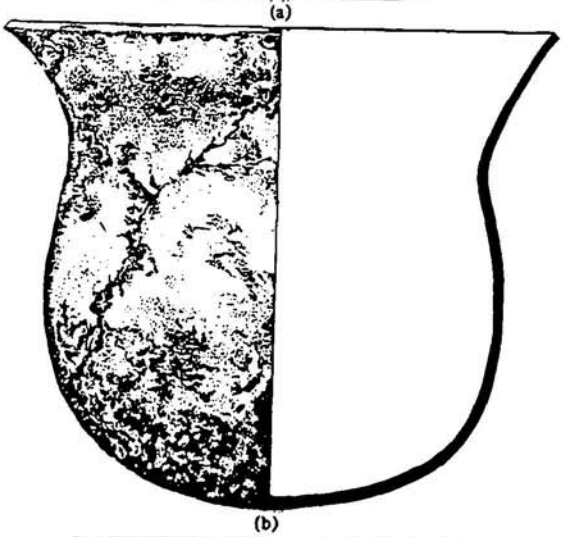
Hand Modelling Evidence of hand modelling appeared in a jar from Gua Cha, a unique amphora-shaped vessel from Pulau Tuba, and large containers.

Segmentation Many of the more complicated shapes comprised several parts, made separately, and then joined together to form a finished vessel. Mouth rims and foot rings, for example, were often separate parts, added at different stages in the process of manufacture. The conical legs of the Kodiang tripod are yet another example of the binding together of separate parts that were additionally strengthened with striations. The segments of the vessel were further bonded by cord-marking the surfaces, which served to strengthen the joins and hold the finished vessel together.

Coiling The only positive evidence of the use of coiling in



(a)



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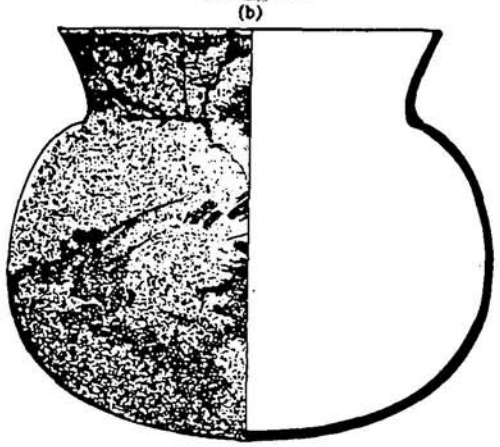


(c)

Jenderam Hilir, Dengkul, Selangor

Complete or fully reconstructed pottery:

a) Vessel a - cord-impressed carinated bowl of Neolothic type

b - c) Vessel b and c (respectively) - plain globular jars with 'Iron Age' affinities.

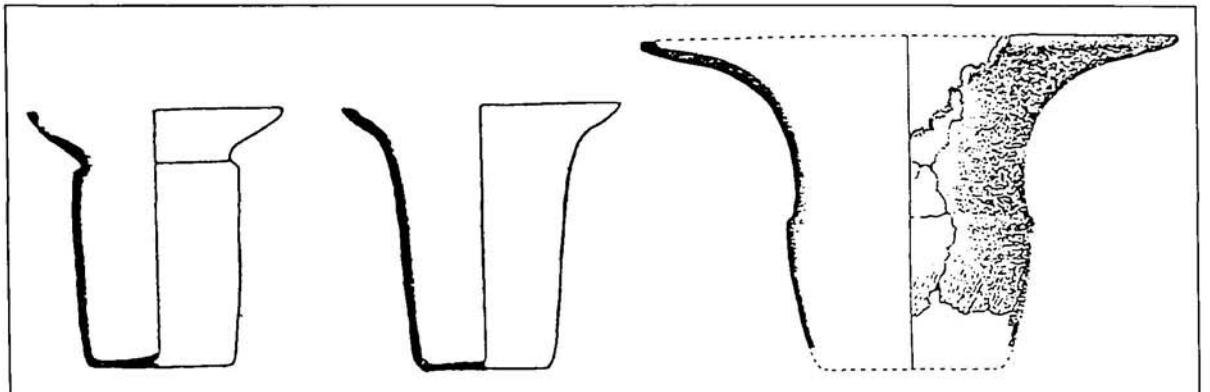
the manufacturing process of prehistoric pottery is found on the interior of the legs of the Kodiang tripods where a spiral-shaped continuous strip of clay can be seen. The exterior is covered with fine cord-marking; the hollow interior, though, is rough and unfinished.

Surface Finishing The joint resulting from the binding together of parts of the composite vessel was sometimes concealed beneath a superficial layer of clay, which resembles a thick slip. Before the application of this final layer, the entire pot was marked to ensure that it adhered to the contour of the vessel. The slip is difficult to recognize because firing was rarely complete and the shards often reveal a different tone or colour at the core which can easily be mistaken for a slip.

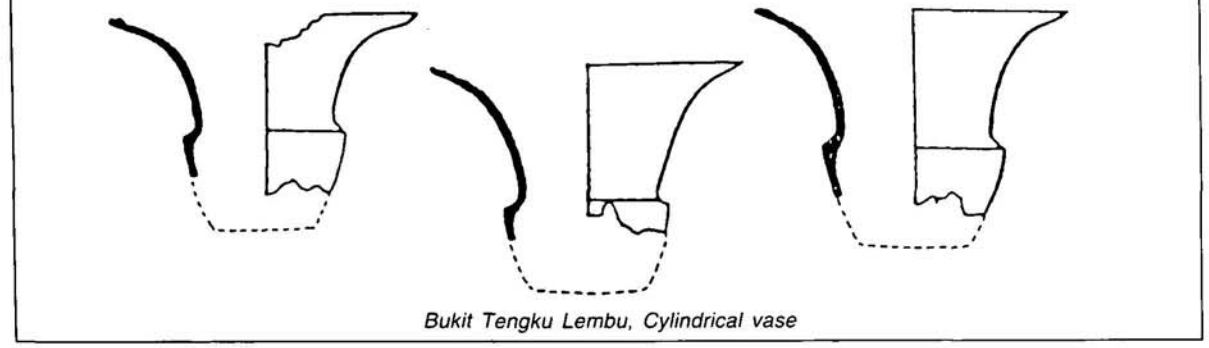
Decoration

Cord-marking Pottery shards with cord-marking on the exterior surface have been found at all sites in Malaysia and in larger numbers than any other material. The cord-marking was applied with a paddle or a beater wrapped with cord. Sometimes a distinct geometrical pattern, such as a diamond or a chequer, was applied; othertimes, the cord-marking was applied in a haphazard manner. The variety of patterns seems to have been created by winding the cord on the paddle in different ways. Closed and open spacing of the cords has been observed and it is possible that the cord was sometimes wound around the paddle in a criss-cross pattern. Beating a vessel in this way indentations were made on the surface which enabled the pot to be handled more firmly than a smooth surface.

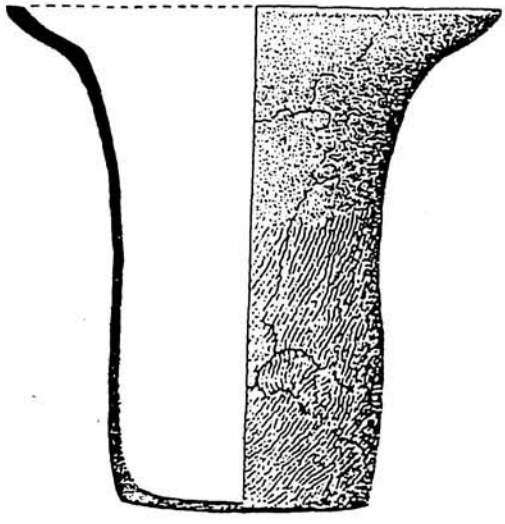
Impressed and Incised Decoration Although other forms of decoration are relatively rare, impressed wares in combination with incising have been found. Three types of tools were commonly used: a pointed



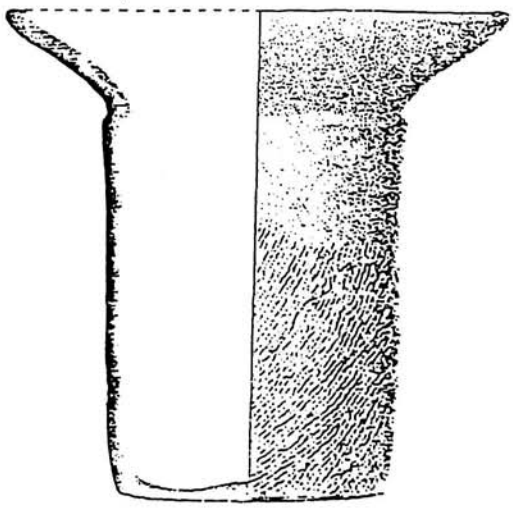
Bukit Tengku Lembu, Trumpet-shaped vase



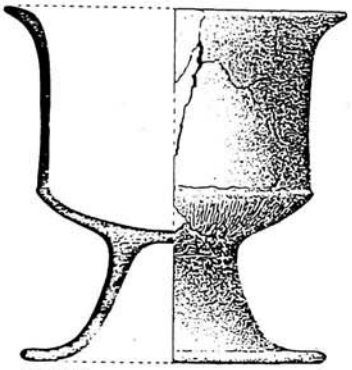
Bukit Tengku Lembu, Cylindrical vase



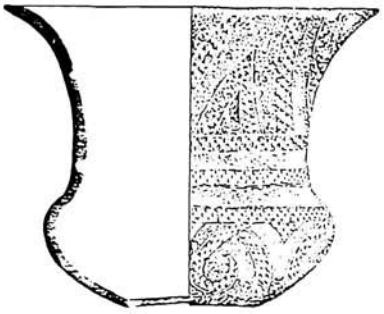
Bukit Tungku Lembu, Cylindrical Vase.



Bukit Tungku Lembu, Cylindrical Vase.



Goblet
Bukit Tengku Lembu, Perlis
Dark brown with patence black underside of up cord marked remainder burnished.



Beaker
Gua Cha Kelantan

instrument, the teeth of a comb, and the wavy edge of a shell. Patterns created with the latter tool have only been found on shards in the west coast areas of Perlis, Kedah, and Perak. In other parts of Malaysia, though, vessels and shards with lines made by pressing the tip of a comb into the clay have been found. A shard from Gua Cha with a faceted mouth rim and a ridge below it (width = 1") is the only known example known that is marked in an irregular pattern with an impression made by finger tips.

Carving Pottery decorated by carving is uncommon in Peninsular Malaysia. Two types, though, did employ this technique to a limited extent. First, a small section of the mouth rim or lip was carved away to form a faceted appearance. Second, V-shaped notches were carved out of the rim to produce a serrated or trill effect.

Perforation A number of sites, particularly Gua Cha, have yielded vessels and shards with perforations. It is unknown whether these holes served a decorative or functional purpose or, perhaps, a combination of the two. In some perforated vessels found at Gua Cha, the holes suggest that they served a purpose beyond mere suspension.

Painting No pottery with painting has been found in Peninsular Malaysia. The closest known examples are slipped wares with a plain, bright red wash over the entire surface.

Conclusion

The main value of the analysis on which this summary is based lies in listing and describing the ceramics from prehistoric sites in Peninsular Malaysia as comprehensively as possible, and in pointing out the shortcomings to understanding Peninsular prehistory. Fascinating potential though, lies in the following types: black pottery from Bukit Tengku Lembu; lip-decorated ware; and the link between Gua Cha and other settlements, particularly Nyong. To enable further development it is essential to locate and identify other sites that are on the scale of Gua Cha and then to conduct proper investigation. A peculiar parallel that needs further exploration is the unquestionable affinity between the tripod pottery found at Kodiang in Kedah and the site Buang Bep, 200 to 300 miles to the north of Thailand. ■

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