

SCIENCE

Remnants of an Ancient Kitchen Are Found in China

Observatory

By SINDYA N. BHANOO JUNE 28, 2012

Fragments of ancient pottery found in southern China turn out to date back 20,000 years, making them the world's oldest known pottery — 2,000 to 3,000 years older than examples found in East Asia and elsewhere.

The ceramics probably consisted of simple concave vessels that were likely used for cooking food, said Ofer Bar-Yosef, an archaeologist at Harvard and an author of the study, which appears in the journal *Science*.

“What it seems is that in China, the making of pottery started 20,000 years ago and never stopped,” he said. “The Chinese kitchen was always based on cooking and steaming; they never made, as in other parts of Asia, breads.”

The crockery, found in Xianrendong Cave in Jiangxi Province, belonged to a group of mobile foragers, Dr. Bar-Yosef said. They were a hunting and gathering community; plant cultivation and agriculture probably did not arrive until about 10,000 years later.

On the other hand, plant cultivation in the Middle East arrived about 1,000 years before it did in China. Still, pottery was not used in the Middle East until much later, Dr. Bar-Yosef said.

“The kitchen of the Middle East was probably based on barbecues and pita breads,” he said. “For pita breads, you don’t have to have pottery — you can grind the seeds and mix it with water, and make it over the fire.”

Correction: June 29, 2012

An earlier version of this post described incorrectly the origins of pottery in the Middle East. Pottery was not used in the Middle East until much later than it was used in China, but Middle Eastern pottery developed more than 8,000 years ago — not “about 2,000 to 2,500 years ago.”

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