

The first containers man used were probably natural objects like gourds or skins, wooden boles, hollowed stones, perhaps even skulls. Almost inevitably the very first use was for collecting, storing and drinking water. Later such containers were used for a vast range of different purposes. Man discovered early on that he could make containers out of clay which is one of the most common rock types all over the world. The great secret he discovered was that if you bake clay containers they change their form from soft plastic to hard pottery or ceramic. He most likely learned this from the effect of the sun on his first simple pots. The great step was to use fire to complete this change.

We learn about the methods he used for making his pottery from the fragments or sherds which are excavated by archaeologists. Although it is quite easy to break a pottery vessel it is impossible to destroy completely. Even if it is ground up into dust it is still possible to identify it as fired clay under a microscope.

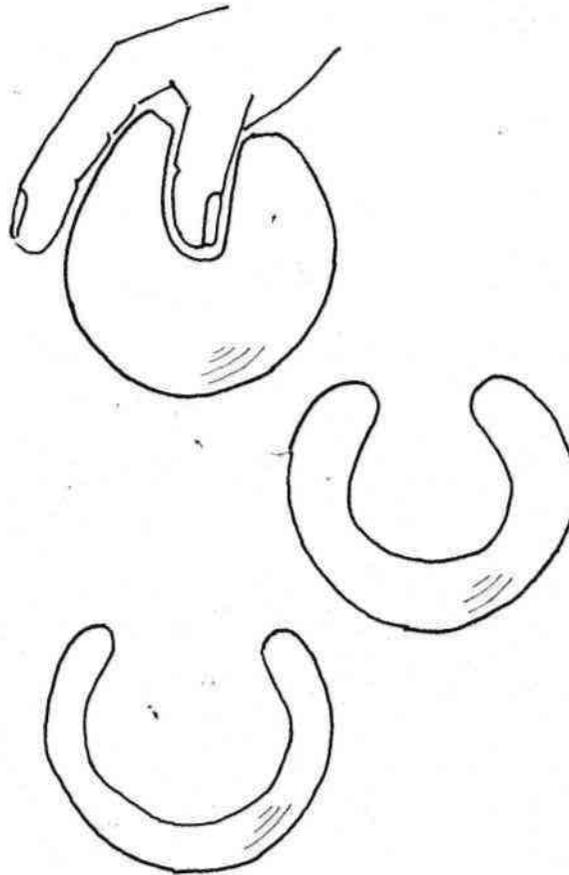


Pottery



By analysing the sherds we can identify two major methods of making pottery by hand. The first is called the lump or ball method. A lump of moist clay about the size of a tennis ball is taken and then prepared by squeezing it roughly in the fingers. It is important at this stage to pick out any tiny stones from the clay because these will spoil the completed pot.

Gradually the clay becomes soft and plastic, in fact, just like plasticine. At this stage roll it into a ball, hold it in one hand and push the thumb of the other hand into the middle of the ball. Already you have a container. Next by carefully squeezing the clay between your thumb and fingers you can shape a simple round bottomed pot. Be careful to make the thickness of the clay the same all the way round the pot. Finally you should have a very simple round bottomed bowl or cup.



The second system is called the coil method. Here you prepare the clay in the same way as the ball method but when it is plastic and free of little stones you make thick clay sausages by rolling it out on a flat surface. Then make a small ball, press it into a flat disc for the base of the pot. Then the sausages of clay are built up around this disc in coils from the walls of the pot. It is important to smooth these coils firmly into each other otherwise they will fall apart when the pot is fired.

The coil method is the most common one used in hand made pots. It is possible to make very large pots indeed by this method. Huge storage pots over 1.50 m tall have been discovered in Ancient Crete.

Although many craftsmen make hand made pots today, the more usual method is to use a potters wheel. Most modern pottery, like the mugs we use everyday, are made in moulds. All pottery, however, has to be fired to turn the clay into hard ceramic.

