In Small Things Remembered: Pottery decoration in Neolithic Southern Italy

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Introduction

In 1977 James Deetz, one of the most creative pioneers of processual social archaeology, published a deceptively compact popular book on archaeology entitled *In Small Things Forgotten* (Deetz 1977).[1] Deetz argued that through looking attentively at the minutiae of daily life we can understand the cultural world of ancient people. Unfortunately, archaeologists have done poorly at understanding the small things of daily life. Our traditional rhetorical strategy has been to subordinate material to theory ruthlessly, culling the world of the past for vignettes illustrating currently popular themes. This, of course, relies upon a prior intuition as to which elements of the archaeological record are relevant to our chosen themes. Sadly, this strategy has the collateral effect of squeezing out of one's view things which do not conform to theoretical interests. For example, in the mainstream North American tradition (Hegmon 2003), the cultural world is partitioned between intentional actions by active individuals and the passive reproduction of cultural traditions, and it is the former which get harnessed to the grand themes of politics and change. British post-processualists have generally done better at critiquing these dualisms and at seeing material practices as meaningful. Agency here has generally been understood in terms of social reproduction. However, rather ironically considering the critique of grand narratives, the attention has focused on grand meanings: megaliths, human origins, cosmologies of life and death. In neither tradition has there been theoretical space for understanding agency in things which are habitual rather than intentional, meaningful but not salient, trivial rather than cosmological.

The goal of this paper is to tackle these small things, forgotten by archaeologists. To some extent this means opening oneself to the directions indicated by the archaeological record, much as Evans-Pritchard (1940) went to the Nuer to study social structure and found himself obliged to become an expert on cattle

because that is what the Nuer themselves were interested in. To put the problem in concrete terms, our excavations of Neolithic sites in Calabria have yielded an abundance of decorated pottery. We cannot claim, *a priori*, that the way this pottery is decorated, through a happy coincidence, must tell us about the particular Important Anthropological Themes we wish to know about. But neither does this mean it is devoid of meaning and should be ignored, as archaeologists have in fact generally done. Hence the goal of this paper is to try to understand how Neolithic Southern Italians understood the process of decorating their pottery. While this is a vast topic, by a close reading of some pertinent examples, our goal is to explore not the meaning of pottery so much as the meaning of the process of creating pottery, particularly in focusing on the relation between tradition and creativity.

The context: Neolithic Southern Italy and its pottery decoration

The archaeological context of this study is the site of Penitenzeria, located at the southernmost tip of the Italian peninsula. The Neolithic began in Southern Italy around 6000 BC and lasted until about 3500 BC[2], and is well-known archaeologically. People grew and ate domesticated plants and animals, and made the basic repertory of Neolithic material things familiar throughout Europe: pottery, polished stone axes, wattle and daub houses, grinding stones, and a typologically

Fig. 1. Decorated Stentinello wares from Penitenzeria (Bova Marina, Calabria), ca. 5500-5000 BC (BMAP excavations).

simple blade-based lithic industry. Settlement varied; people lived in large ditched villages in some areas, in unditched villages in others and in small, dispersed settlements in others (Cazzella & Moscoloni 1992; Genick 1993; Cremonesi 1992; Malone 2003; Robb 2007)[3].

Our focus here in particular is the Stentinello pottery of Southern Calabria and Sicily, a regional derivative of Impressed Ware which remained in use from the early 6th millennium BC for at least a millennium until the mid-5th millennium. As investigated by the Bova Marina Archaeological Project from 1997 through the present, Southern Calabria was a mountainous and apparently sparsely populated region where people seem to have lived in very small, dispersed villages or even isolated houses. People inhabited a strip of land about 10 km wide between the sea and the apparently uninhabited high mountains of Aspromonte. However, social life was not entirely isolated. People living here could see other areas, such as Sicily across the Straits of Messina to the west, and they participated in a flourishing trade in obsidian, by which obsidian from nearby Lipari passed through their territory to move throughout Southern Italy, the Adriatic, and even Croatia 1000 km away.

Penitenzeria is a site barely 50 meters square where people lived for a few hundred years between circa 5500 and 5000 BC. Excavation has located a thick midden deposit but no structures. However, the site is delimited by cliffs and rock outcrops on all sites, and given the use of space on other Neolithic sites, it cannot have been inhabited by more than a few families at the most. Some daub with stick and reed impressions was found, confirming the presence of houses at the site. Pending further research, the best interpretation of the site is a small cluster of a house or houses; such structures tend to be relatively ephemeral archaeologically unless conditions are favorable for the preservation of house daub, but a spatially concentrated occupation left a dense midden which seems to have been deposited relatively rapidly – up to a meter in the space of less than four centuries. Palaeobotanical and faunal remains reveal a typical Neolithic economy based upon domesticated crops and animals. Over 90 % of the lithics were made of obsidian almost certainly from Lipari, showing an active participation in a regional trade network.

By and large, Neolithic Italian pottery has not fared well at the hands of archaeologists. Italian prehistorians have normally made pottery a focus of intensive and detailed study. However, they have traditionally regarded pottery as a culture-historical indicator of a shared "culture" and used it to trace migrations and less concrete cultural "influences" exerted by one region upon another. More recently, it has been used principally as a chronological indicator for constructing cultural sequences and dating sites. While both approaches are useful, both

incur theoretical liabilities in the way of questionable assumptions and neither sheds much light upon the social reasons of why people made pottery in the ways they did. Using pottery as an indication of cultural affiliation, for instance, disregards variation and social choice within an assemblage; using pottery for dating leaves most of any assemblage except for the type fossils uninterpreted. Most Anglo-American archaeologists over the last several decades have failed to engage with pottery as a theoretical topic. Malone (1985) has argued that some pottery styles were prestige wares used for long-distance trade and ritual practices. Although thin-section analyses have uniformly shown that pottery was locally made (Muntoni 2003; Spataro 2002), this usefully opened up the question of contextual usage, particularly of elaborately ornate finewares such as Serra d'Alto wares. Skeates (1998) and Pluciennik (1997) have similarly argued that Neolithic pottery must be analyzed as meaningful material culture. Both present arguments quite compatible with our focus here, particularly with Skeates' contextualised biography of red-painted pottery in the Abruzzo and with Pluciennik's view that pottery constituted a sphere of meaningful social action for particular groups of social actors. However, these stimulating beginnings have not really been followed through with systematic and detailed interpretation.

Pottery, of course, can be analysed from many different angles. Here we want to choose just one focus, that of surface decoration. Pottery decoration has been the archaeologists' *bête noire*. For many of us, pottery makes up the vast majority of our finds. Its decoration is highly variable. It is a completely plastic medium and the decoration cannot be ascribed to any simple practical necessity. Hence pottery decoration demands interpretation. But in spite of a vast range of stylistic, symbolic and ethnoarchaeological analyses (Hegmon 1992; Hegmon 1998; Rice 1987), it is difficult to think of an archaeological phenomenon which is more obviously socially variable and less frequently interpreted to our satisfaction. We would argue that this partly results from a flawed idea of symbols and agency. Archaeologists have tended to assume that when we investigate symbols, their meanings should be large meanings, socially salient, central to social reproduction, cosmologically central, part of a master discourse of some sort: prestige, hierarchy, cosmological order, ancestry. Given this, one has either to tie pottery decoration to such grand themes explicitly (for example Hodder 1982) in a way which unconvincingly magnifies its salience in daily life, or succumb to the lurking suspicion that pottery decoration was, basically, unimportant wallpaper. Neither does justice to the phenomenon. Our goal in this paper is to force open a theoretical space somewhere between intention and structure, between strategy and tradition, where we can understand the material agency of things like pottery.

Pottery as creative action

In a broad sense, our approach to pottery here is to regard it as a social technology, an act of doing in which people exercise agency (Dobres 2001; Michelaki 2006). In pursuing this, one must shift the focus from the final product (the fired pot, used, broken, deposited, recovered and analysed archaeologically) to the process of potting. Over several generations, a handful of potters at the tiny village at Penitenzeria made a series of small bowls. In doing so, they exercised skill, manual and aesthetic reflexes, and critical judgment. It is by probing these qualities of action that we can begin to understand why and how they decorated their vessels as they did.

Skill

To begin with an obvious fact somewhat obscured by the very abundance of pottery in archaeological contexts: Italian Neolithic potting was a seriously regarded craft. The scale of production was probably small; a few potters producing just enough for the village's needs would probably have made at most 10-20 vessels each per year (following Perlés's & Vitelli's (1995) arguments for the Greek Early Neolithic). Though potters would have been recognized for their skills, we cannot imagine potters to have been true economic specialists. Nevertheless, making pots represented a substantial commitment of activity. As a task, potting was embedded in time, space, and material projects. Making a pot committed the potter to a program of several weeks of seasonal activity (it was probably a dry-season task, carried out between spring and autumn), and to composing a range of places, materials, and social relationships. The extended *chaîne operatoire* (Cassano, Muntoni & Barbaro 1995) began with a careful selection of clays from the dozen or so identifiable clay sources available around Penitenzeria. All of these look superficially identical, but only some work well for making impasto pottery; producing *figulina* finewares required knowledge of a specific kind of clay probably found at a single outcrop in the vicinity. Clay was probably ground to powder on grinding stones and mixed with water hauled from nearby springs. Temper (typically crushed metamorphic rock) had to be gathered from several kilometers away and prepared. The paste had to be prepared appropriately for the vessel's use. Potters made at least half a dozen different fabrics. While there was a broad central ground of impasto fabrics with variations of temper, some of which were probably interchangeable, some wares were used for different styles of vessel (e.g. *figulina* wares), and others seem to have been adapted to specific tasks such as cooking wares. The whole process was a series of knowledgeable involvements.

Fig. 2. A "learning sherd"; decoration is slightly less regular than on most sherds and pattern is unusual; inside surface of bowl (not shown) is highly irregular and lumpy (BMAP excavations, Penitenzeria).

Potters took care to create smooth, symmetrically formed, well-finished, thin-walled vessels. In hand-built ceramics, as potters learn their craft, their wares typically become marked by a number of recognizable traits, including the ability to construct larger and more complex vessels, a greater control of symmetry, an even and thin wall thickness, an even rim thickness, and a consistent and attractive surface polish (Kamp 2001). The high level of skill attained by the Penitenzeria potters is marked clearly by the presence of all of these attributes in their works (and underscored by their absence in our own attempts to replicate Stentinello pottery). Not only skill was required but commitment of time; smoothing and scraping the walls to a uniform thinness can take much more time than actually forming the bowl in the first place. A carefully prepared vessel of regular thickness has a greater chance of firing successfully, and the results of this application of skill are immediately visible in the finished product.

Manual craft skills such as how to form a ceramic paste, mold it, decorate it and fire it are taught and conserved in highly local "communities of practice" (Sassaman & Rudolphi 2001). People learn and maintain traditions by working together. That the process was taught to learners (whether children or adult) at Penitenzeria is suggested by one example of a learner's vessel (Figure 2). Here the different stages of the pottery-making process are carried out with different levels of skill. The fabric is fine and identical to that of many other vessels, and may well have been mixed up as part of a large batch by a fully skilled potter. But the vessel is formed poorly; the interior remains lumpy and irregular; uneven wall thickness is often a mark of unskilled but learning potters (Crown 2001). Motor habits such as forming vessels are more difficult to acquire than decorative schemas (Gosselain 1998). Here, while the surface is well-smoothed, the design follows a rudimentary and non-standard layout, although its execution is cred-

ible and only slightly more irregular than that of most bowls. Finally, the pot has been successfully fired. Firing pots successfully in an open fire requires skill and experience, and it seems likely that this pot was fired by a more skilled potter as part of a batch. Given the general high quality of fine bowls here, the decision to fire it at all is somewhat surprising, and perhaps an additional indication that a learning potter made it; a more accomplished potter might instead have either remodeled it or consigned it to the scrapheap unfired.

As an anthropological topic, skill is often overlooked; perhaps because we live in a world of specialized labor and standardized material products, we take for granted that ancient people bothered to do things to a stringent and often functionally superfluous standard. This is all the more so when it involves a form of labor we may not perceive as valuable due to gender or other biases (contrast the literature on food preparation with that on hunting, for example). However, technological action is an important exercise of agency; it involves the ongoing engagement of the worker's body, mind, and reflexes with the constantly changing material world (Dobres 2001). In this case, the experience of our Neolithic potters is evident in a highly patterned archaeological assemblage; they were able to match the paste of the fabric with the vessel form, firing procedure, and intended function. Here, we note two pertinent examples of skill, motor actions and timing. Skill is a matter of forming bodily reflexes in conformity with the material world (Ingold 2000). Through training, motor skills become internalized and automatic; the hand knows how to act (Minar & Crown 2001). As noted above, in learning to be a Neolithic potter, one had to acquire the motor reflexes to create thin-walled vessels with walls and rims of even thickness; as the surviving fragments show correction of errors only rarely, these tasks were regularly performed with high accuracy. Secondly, timing is a key element of strategic practice (Bourdieu 1977). Here, as the process of making a specific pot unfolded, potters exercised the keen sense of timing needed to form, decorate and fire clay. Each operation had to be carried out when the paste was at a specific level of moistness, in effect within windows of sometimes less than an hour in a process that extended over several days; as the nascent vessel was continually drying, the potter had to monitor it and act promptly when the moment was right. For example, a pot larger than a medium-sized bowl or a pot of a complex, composite form would have to be made in stops and starts; the lower section would have to dry before it could support the weight of a heavy upper section, and pieces such as necks and bodies would have to dry slightly before being fitted together. Similarly, impressing decoration had to be done after an interval of drying but before the clay hardened too much. The same was true of burnishing, which had to be done when the body was leather-hard, with the additional proviso that the drier the surface, the glossier

the resulting shine would be but the less forgiving of mis-strokes the burnished surface would be.

Knowledge and ability can serve as social capital and components of identity. As Sinclair (1995) points out, the ability to execute tasks involving intricate senses of timing, manual control, or planning can be considered iconic of valued personality characteristics such as patience, decisiveness or strength. In Italian Neolithic pottery, some of the more technically ambitious vessels, particularly among the painted buff figulina wares which required a very careful selection and control of clays, coloring agents, and firing, may have been attempted not in spite of but because of their ostentatious difficulty. To the larger community one's identity may have been enhanced by the ability to provide the pottery vessels needed for daily life and social interaction. To the "community of practice" of potters, mastery of these motor and aesthetic skills through long experience would have marked one as an important member of a closely-knit group. All of this suggests the potter as agent: working the material world as creation of the self.

How to create a design: tradition and creativity

So what did our skillful agents actually do? In our assemblage of about 450 rims, there is clearly a modal bowl, a standard formal pattern (Figure 3a). The great majority of the decorated bowls at Penitenzeria whose fragments are large enough to make out the decoration scheme can be seen as a variation upon this basic pattern. Around the rim is a band of interrupted decoration in which small blocks of one stamped motif, usually parallel zig-zag lines or grids, alternate with blocks of other motifs. Below this is an empty space. Below this is an uninterrupted band whose middle is made of zig-zags, fringed upon the top and bottom with a line of stamped motifs, usually triangles. Each pot in a living assemblage necessarily references all other pots in the assemblage; it is clear that designs at Penitenzeria, a site occupied for a discrete span of a few generations, vary much less than they do at Umbro, a nearby site occupied for over a millennium.

Paradoxically, however, at the same time as it is evident that the bowls share a common design, no bowl conforms to it exactly (Figure 3b). It is probably more accurate to see these vessels not as reproducing a single design, a sort of Neolithic blue willow plate, so much as sharing generative rules for how to go about putting together a design. In this sense the potter's reflexes were a kind of habitus (Dietler & Herbich 1998). These generative rules included both prescriptions – "decoration is denser closer to the rim"; "decoration is arranged in horizontal bands which can be broken into segments", and so on – and norms for how much one could –

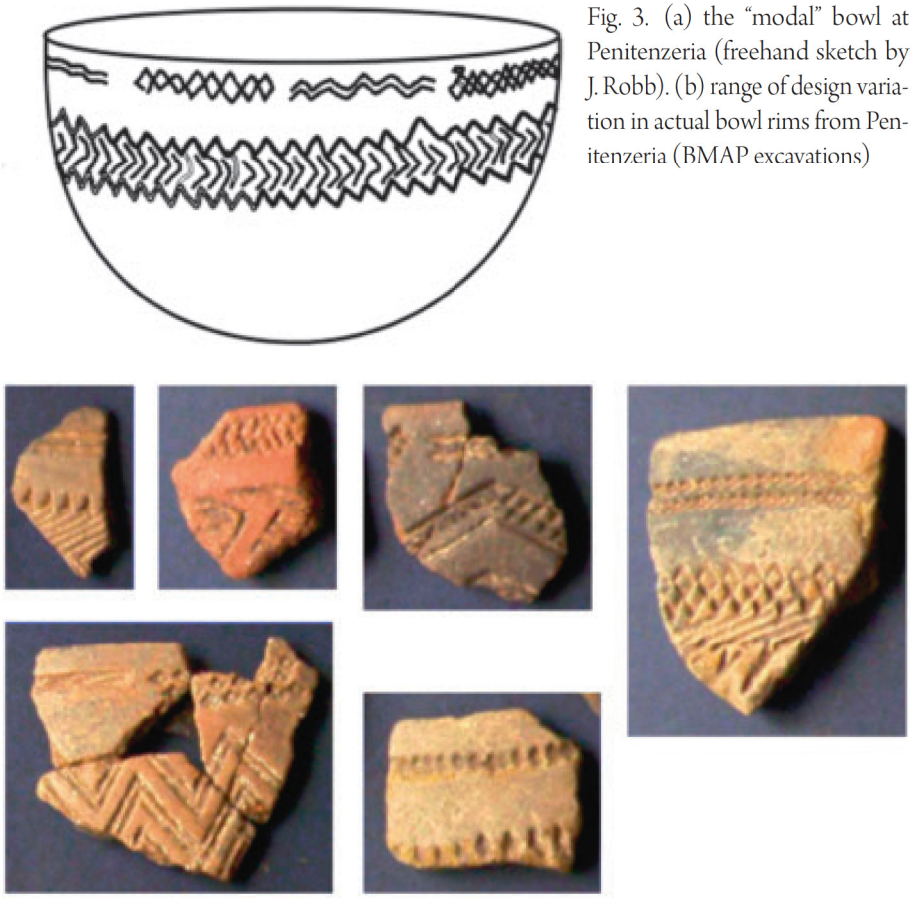

Fig. 3. (a) the "modal" bowl at Penitenzeria (freehand sketch by J. Robb). (b) range of design variation in actual bowl rims from Penitenzeria (BMAP excavations)

indeed, should – vary the design. While precise quantification is impossible due to the highly fragmented nature of the pottery assemblage, we have the visual impression that almost no small-medium decorated bowl reproduces our hypothetical template exactly, but nor do many vary from this template by more than about three alterations of pattern or substitutions of motif. Thus, the potter's reflex was to improvise creatively within well-defined boundaries, to recombine techniques, motifs, and grammars to create novel designs. No two vessels are ever alike – but creativity and innovation took place within narrow and well-defined limits.

Archaeologically, one important effect of this process is that "potting communities" (*Ibid.*) tended to form distinctive local micro-styles. This is a feature of Stentinello wares often noted (Ammerman 1985; Leighton 1999; Maniscalco & Iovino 2002; Morter 1992); for a parallel example from the Tyrrhenian coast, see Cuda & Murgano (2002). For example, on vessels made in other areas where Stentinello style pottery was used, bands of decoration around the rim were almost

always continuous and unbroken. At Penitenzeria, the motifs used in rim bands could be changed, but they conformed to a common local norm that such bands should be discontinuous.

This prolific habit of recombining elements and techniques to create difference is also visible on larger scales too. Between 5500 and 5000 BC, Neolithic Southern Italians decorated their pots in a remarkably florid and varied range of styles; recognized styles in use during this period include several distinct kinds of Impressed Wares, Passo di Corvo bichrome painted wares, Catignano trichrome wares, Matera Scratched Wares, Monte Venere wares, and Stentinello wares, and there may have been early examples of trichromes such as Scaloria, Capri, Ripoli or Serra d'Alto wares too. But while most styles can be associated with a general region, the boundaries between them are normally hazy and potters clearly worked across archaeological "styles". While potters can and do learn new styles, possibly the most important vector of exchanging knowledge about techniques and styles was the movement of potters themselves, generally over short distances but sometimes into surprisingly distant communities (Dietler & Herbich 1998, Gosselain 1998, MacEachern 1998). In Italian Neolithic assemblages, this is likely to be one reason why quite distinctive wares are found on most sites – for example the buff finewares found in combination with Stentinello wares on many sites. Beyond this, we can sometimes spot "mutant sherds" which represent actual acts of recombination. In one example from Matera, someone working within the Matera tradition of scratched decoration, normally used to execute rigidly geometrical designs, tried out a bold non-geometrical design borrowed from trichrome painted pots. In another example from Ariano Irpino, a common Impressed Ware scheme of decorating a vessel with rim bands of "c" shaped impressions was painstakingly reproduced by scratching each motif. Occasionally these recombinations resulted in evanescent local micro-styles. Painted and impressed wares were used together throughout Southern Italy in the 6th millennium, but they seem to have been recognized as distinct kinds of pots and painting and impressing were never combined on vessels. However, for a brief period around the time when painting was introduced, before this rule became standard, one finds potters in central and northern Puglia and the Materano experimenting with using the two techniques together. Similarly, rocker stamping was used all over Italy, but virtually exclusively for large, heavy vessels with decoration randomly spread over their surface. In a small area of Southern Puglia, a miniature version of rocker stamping was substituted as a motif into geometric fineware patterns carried out elsewhere with other impressions.

To summarise, thus, for much of the Early and Middle Neolithic in Italy, the potter's reflex was the regulated, rule-bound creation of difference. That this is

not a universal aspect of pottery-making but something culturally specific will be discussed below. The archaeological result of this creative process is nested micro-local, local and regional styles – or fractal styles, if you will. From the archaeologists' point of view, this creates a nightmare. There is an incredible diversity of recognizable but fuzzily bounded styles. But this diversity is cross-cut by shared grammars, common motifs, and family resemblances. Styles such as Ripoli wares (Cremonesi & Tozzi 1985) and Stentinello wares persist for millennia but they constantly evolve. There are distinct and robust patterns visible in the material ("painting is never combined with impressing on a single vessel"; "designs are always denser near the rim"), but it is impossible to define unbreakable rules; somebody was always willing to make an exception. Such inconsiderate habits have caused much wasted ink among pottery typologists. Or, to put it another way, we have yet to tailor our methodologies to fit the specific material these humans generate through their creative tendencies to generate difference. Theoretically, the kind of variation observed, both within a single assemblage such as at Pen-

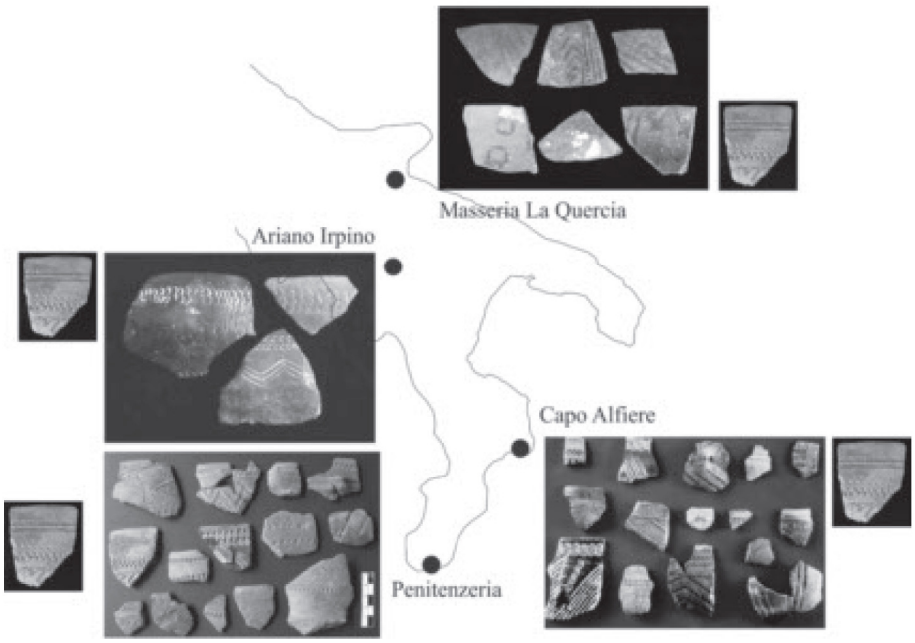

Fig. 4. Same vessel seen in different contexts, all 6th millennium BC. From south to north: (a) decorated bowl from Penitenzeria in its native assemblage, see also Figure 1 (BMAP excavations); (b) Northern Calabrian variety of Stentinello wares, Capo Alfiere (photo Jon Morter); (c) contemporary Incised and Impressed wares, La Starza di Ariano Irpino, Campania (Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology); (d) contemporary painted buff *figulina* wares, Masseria La Quercia, Puglia (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford).

itenzeria and regionally, can be understood only by seeing the potters as creative agents working within, but sometimes against, ongoing traditions.

The phenomenology of potting: Local knowledge

How would pottery decoration have been perceived and understood by Neolithic people? Here we are not focusing upon any potential quasi-iconographic meaning of particular motifs, which we regard both as probably unrecoverable archaeologically and as not necessarily the most salient aspect of decoration in any case. Rather, in keeping with our focus upon the ordinariness of small things, we are interested in considering Neolithic people's general ability to recognize a design as familiar and make sense of it, as part of their fleeting and everyday acts of perception.

To make a pot, potters played with distinctions within the most local frame of reference. We have the constant multiplication of small differences, which creates nested traditions, styles, and micro-styles, a sort of fractal style. However, one's ability to "read" these differences would depend on sharing the frame of reference, the context, of the potter and his or her community. For example, Figure 4 shows a sherd from Penitenzeria, placed in a series of contrasts representing different potential frames of reference at increasing distance northwards from the site (for site descriptions for collections used, see Jones 1987; Morter 1992; Trump 1963). To someone who lived at the site – at least, someone concerned with pottery decoration enough to examine it carefully – the minute distinctions between pots made by different potters would probably have been as individual as the style of someone's writing is to us. Judging by the differences between the neighboring sites of Penitenzeria and Umbro, there seem to have been minute but consistent differences even between very close communities. Someone whose frame of reference was another Stentinello community – perhaps someone from another micro-style area such as the Catania, Siracusa or Crotone areas – would probably have perceived many familiar techniques and motives but a distinctly Calabrian grammar. For example, Stentinello pottery from Sicily tends to have more densely covered surfaces and continuous decorative bands formed from one or two elements rather than broken bands in which motifs alternate. Going further afield, to someone whose frame of reference was the Matera Scratched Ware zone or the refined geometrical Impressed Ware found in Puglia, Stentinello pots would have included generically comprehensible geometric arrays etched into dark surfaces, with a salient difference being the principal technique used to carry out these. Yet further afield, a traveler from the Adriatic coast where most finewares were then being made of buff painted wares may well not have picked up on any of these distinctions within the vast western world of dark impressed bowls.

The point is that every pot incorporated layers of distinction whose penetration depended on local knowledge. One parallel here is with landscapes; it is the locals who know the hidden histories and unseen burials of each piece of land which a stranger sees as generic landscape. Socially, this is not a trivial point. What is central is the link between knowledge, agency, and identity. If academics understand any theme about agency from our own experience, it is that knowledge is a negotiable field of discourse which people mobilize in action and which validates their identity claims. Part of any social interaction – often unconscious but always fundamental to communication and social positioning – is evaluating what our interlocutors know and think about something and how it compares to our own understanding. Shared knowledge is co-identity, gaps in knowledge mark social difference.

If this is so, then Neolithic pottery could not be understood in absolute terms; its meaning was context-dependent, and its context, in turn, was relational, e.g. it was an element of the relationship between the person viewing it and the person making it. Hence, making, and interpreting, a complexly decorated pot was situated agency, agency qualified by identity, history and circumstance. Unlike social information models of style (Wobst 1977), our potters are not signaling pre-constituted identities to people who do not know them. For one thing, much of the fine distinctions are visible only when a pot is not being used, and from close up. This implies that if they are intentionally aimed at anyone, it would be in a context of close inspection and discussion rather than the casual user. Rather, our potters here are colluding with others who understand their pottery to continually reconstitute a field of knowledgeable discourse within which they can think of themselves and be acknowledged as efficacious agents. And it was a local and situated field of discourse.

Some concluding thoughts: Agency, aesthetics, and long term change

To sum up this discussion, let's return to the dreaded question, "What did Neolithic pottery decoration mean?" If we follow the classic Saussurean definition of a symbol, it is doubtful that these patterns "meant" anything in particular. Even if they did carry some explicit iconography now lost to us, this may not have been the real point of the decoration. Instead, we have focused upon two particular aspects of Neolithic potting: the exercise of skill, and the manipulation of difference in creating decoration. In both of these, potters both worked within a community of practice and negotiated their relationship to that community and the ceramic tradition it reproduced. Agency worked in the space between individual

and collective, between strategic and traditional. Moreover, pottery decoration constituted a very local form of discourse, and, as with any stock of local cultural capital, the ability to understand it was a measure of the relationship between people. The fact that this form of cultural capital was not harnessed to an exchanged product, political hierarchy, or ritual status does not mean it was not important to people's sense of local identity. In some ways, it is precisely because pottery decoration was a basic background element of ordinary social life – a small thing forgotten – that it formed a persuasive part of the construction of social reality.

We thus have a paradoxical, but, we believe, quite common situation where the principal purpose of exercising that agency was to maintain a field of discourse within which such agency could be exercised. The agency of Neolithic potters throws into relief several important characteristics of agency (see Robb 2007 for more extensive discussion). First, it is culturally defined within specific fields of meaningful action and kinds of persons. We cannot talk about social agency in the abstract as a pure substance or force, like gravity or electricity; we have to understand the agency of being a potter, or a politician, or a parent: each on their own terms and without automatically prioritizing one over another. Secondly, agency is material. Acting materially is not a transparent process of shaping inert matter to a higher will. Rather, material media and their rules enable people to engage in creative activity, and to act creatively we need to embrace the nature of the medium as we construct it. Carrying out a material activity requires belief, commitment, social relations, long-term projects. And our action shapes us in return, by requiring us to acquire knowledge or skill, or by creating long-term social commitments. Hence, pursuing a field of material action becomes at the same time a project of the self: being a potter, as opposed to making a pot. Thirdly, agency is always situated. In strategic models of agency we sometimes are presented with actors who propose to act universally, without constraint or local frame of reference. But this is wrong. People are situated in specific histories and circumstances; action is planned and judged relative to who you are, what situations you are in and what choices you are presented with. Finally, if agency is always relative to a specific field of action; it follows that there must be multiple kinds of agency in any society. If agency relates to different modes of cultural action, it makes perfect sense to suppose that individuals can alternate between multiple forms of agency. Consider ritual; many rituals create spaces to act as different kinds of being temporarily. The same is true for political authority.

This leads to a final ramification of our argument – the question of how different elements of social life relate to each other. As noted above, one traditional approach to the archaeological record is to assume that one or another theme – typically ecology, political process or cultural structure – provides the real bottom

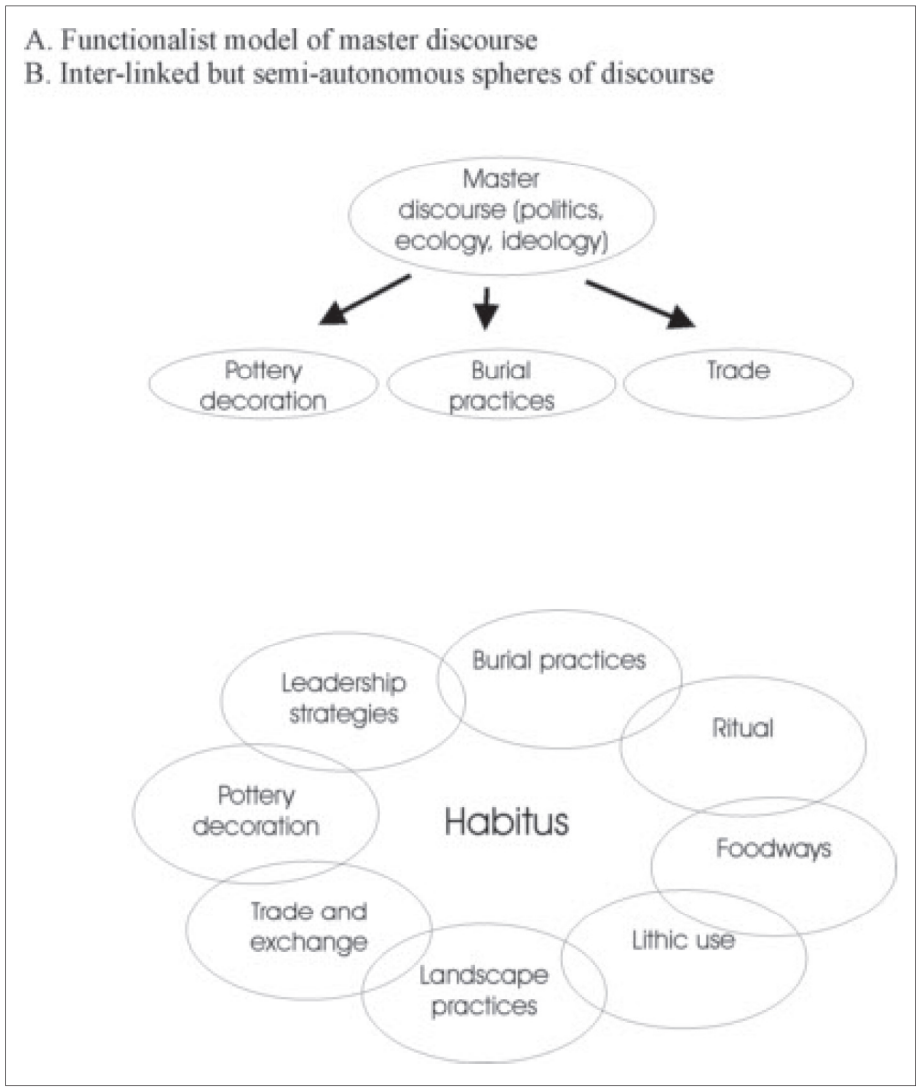

Fig. 5. (a) Functionalist dominance of one sphere of discourse over others; (b) Interrelated, semi-autonomous spheres of discourse.

line for interpretation and to reduce other elements of social life to manifestations or props for it. At the very least, methodologically, we need to understand how pottery worked semantically in human terms before using it for chronology or political analysis. However, unless we are specifically and narrowly interested in pottery decoration *per se*, it is useful to get beyond the phenomenology of pottery to social analysis. The question here is how different areas of agency relate to each other (Figure 5).

Early-Middle Neolithic	Late-Final Neolithic
creation of difference	creation of ceramic similarity
spatially distinct gender symbolism	spatially merged gender symbolism
no common axis of prestige symbolism	common axis of prestige symbolism
trade little and not central to politics	trade increased and integrated into politics

Fig. 6. General contrast of Early-Middle and Late-Final Neolithic in Southern Italy.

Here we will just sketch out a very rapid capsule example, the parallel changes in pottery style and in social organization which mark the end of the Neolithic. This transition in Italy is broadly similar to elsewhere in the Mediterranean, both in terms of pottery decoration styles with the replacement of ornate finewares with plain, often glossy black and red surfaces, and in social organization with a shift to more extended social networks, elaborated burial and trade (Sherratt 1984; 1994).

The kind of pottery we have been discussing, with the proliferation of small-scale differences to create layers of local knowledge, is stylistically heterarchical (Ehrenreich, Crumley & Levy 1995). Because the designs are polythetic and complex, there is no clear single axis of evaluation possible. In comparing any two vessels, there are always common elements to serve as the basis for some relationship and differences to mark social distinction. If we, somewhat artificially, identify a cultural reflex it embodies, it is this heterarchical proliferation of difference. There are other elements which suggest a generally heterarchical organization of agencies in Neolithic Italy (Robb 2007). One is spatially distinct gender symbolizations, with male and female referencing in distinct zones. Another is the lack of anything which looks like a simple, stereotyped axis of prestige, for instance in grave goods. A third is the evidence for heterogeneity in other forms of material culture, notably figurines. Finally, there is the lack of integration of trade into anything which looks like political authority (Morter & Robb 1998; Robb 1994a; 1994b; 2007). In effect, we may have had ritual, trade, material production, and so on, as quite distinct contexts of meaning, identity and power, possibly existing in tension (Figure 6).

Now consider late Neolithic pots in the so-called Diana style (approximately 4400-3600 BC), named after the type site on Lipari (Brea & Cavalier 1960) (Figure 7). Pots like this are basically identical and immediately recognizable over a huge area of Southern Italy and Sicily. Their hallmark is a plain, undecorated, surface, the only adornment is a stereotypical tubular spool-shaped handle (*ansa a rocchetta*) which would have been as immediately recognizable to Neolithic people as it is even to beginning archaeologists; the fineware bowls with red surfaces are particularly distinctive.

Fig. 7. Diana style Late Neolithic wares from Umbro (Bova Marina, Calabria), later 5th millennium BC (BMAP excavations).

What changed? Potters still worked in small local communities of practice, but micro-styles vanished, and this suggests that the link between the potter's production and the tradition it referenced changed. Diana vessels are as carefully and skillfully made as earlier pots – indeed, though they are less ornate, they may have taken more labor to make, as burnishing is a highly time-consuming part of the *chaîne opératoire* – but the goal is different. All surface decoration has been abolished. Instead of an aesthetic of finely tuned difference and layers of local knowledge, the new aesthetic is one of unlayered identification and superficial interchangeability. Effectively, the intention is an immediate recognizability and transactability liberated from the involutions of local knowledge. What pottery surface decoration was intended to accomplish was ready conformity with an inter-regional shared "look".

Again, the social context suggests that this change in aesthetic reflex was mirrored in other spheres of agency (Robb 2007). Most obviously, the obsidian exchange system expanded greatly, with more obsidian moving further. Spatially,

people occupied new areas of highlands and offshore islands, probably through pastoral use. The reorganization of burial suggests an increasing emphasis upon genealogy as a form of relating people, and there is the beginning of recognizable axes of prestige distinction in burials which emerge fully in the Copper Age. These have been interpreted as the reorganization of social networks from a heterarchical Great Man-like situation of multiple, narrowly-defined competences to one of fewer, more generalized bases of prominence. The glossy, uniform, reflective look of highly burnished surfaces may itself embody a new synaesthetic association between social value and brightness or gleam.

We are thus not talking about social organization in a structural-functionalist sense so much as cultural styles or reflexes for dealing with multiple agencies. Effectively, the Late Neolithic was the great simplification around fewer, more generalized dimensions of social comparison and evaluation (Robb 1999; 2007). Heterarchy was not replaced by hierarchy; there is little evidence for hierarchy in the Late Neolithic, and heterarchy is common in all societies. But it is simply a different kind of heterarchy, one marked less by the creation of difference and more by isomorphic elements competing for parity. And this change in social reproduction had long-term consequences. Intensification of the Early-Middle Neolithic world ideologically results in something like Malta in the temple period (Robb 2007). Intensification of the Late-Final Neolithic system of social reproduction yields something like the early stratified societies of the Bronze Age. Hence cultural style – a set of reflexes reproduced through pottery decoration among other forms of social action – was an integral element of long-term trajectories of change.

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Notes

1 We use this title in homage, as for one of us (JR) Deetz's book was a wonderful first introduction to archaeology, and with two decades' retrospect on the development of North American archaeological theory we see it as an important road not taken.
2 All dates discussed in this article are based upon calibrated radiocarbon dates.
3 Robb (2007) provides a broad introduction to the archaeology of the Italian Neolithic.

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