

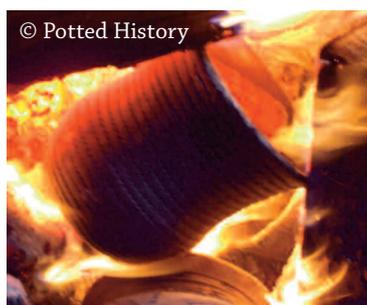
Making Prehistoric Pottery

Pottery production in prehistoric Scotland was very different to how it is made now. Pots were made of coarse 'boulder clay', which contained a lot of grit and sand. The pots were formed by pinching and pulling the clay by hand, adding large coils to build the pot up, before firing in an open fire. Pots were used for cooking, storing food, brewing beer, and for burying the ashes of the dead after cremation.



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Pinching a pot



© Potted History

Firing pottery

Clay deposits are fairly common across Scotland so most clay would have been locally sourced. The clay was prepared by working it with hands to even out the moisture and grit, with stones and larger pieces taken out. Sometimes material such as animal dung, grass or crushed pottery would be added. These inclusions or 'temper' help to make the clay firm and enabled it to be worked for a long time. It also helped to draw moisture out of the pot when it was dried before firing. However, it could also cause the clay to crack and lead to weak points when the pottery was fired.

Once the rough size and shape of the pot was achieved the edges could be smoothed with a scraper tool. It was then allowed to dry for a few hours before refining the shape and adding decoration. Whilst the methods are relatively simple, experience and skill are required to make an effective pot in a reasonable amount of time.



© Michael Sharpe

These Bronze Age food vessels in Dunrobin Castle Museum show a variety of decoration

Decoration was almost always geometric – formed of lines

and dots in angular repeating patterns. These were impressed into the clay using combs, string, bone, wood, thin stone or anything else at hand. Many prehistoric pots are heavily decorated, which would have taken many hours. This suggests that the decoration was of some importance.



© Susan Kruse

Pottery from burials at a cairn at Raigmore, Inverness, now in Inverness Museum

The clay was allowed to dry for several days before firing. If there was any moisture still in the clay it forced the clay apart when heated and broke the pot. The pot was heated next to the fire before eventually being laid directly in the embers. Burning material would then be built up around the pot to make sure it all reached over 600 degrees, which solidified the clay into ceramic. The colour of the pottery depended upon various factors. If there was lots of oxygen the ceramic 'oxidised' turning pink or brown. If there was less oxygen the pottery was 'reduced' turning black or grey. Organic inclusions contain carbon that also turns the pottery black.

See also:

Box 1 object sheets: Beaker Pots, Prehistoric Pottery
Additional images: Highland Bronze Age Beakers

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