

Ceramics in Samoa



Intact ceramic vessels or parts of them that are found in archaeological excavations constitute important evidence when investigating the date and cultural affiliation of the people who made and used them. At the earliest dated site in Samoa, the Mulifanua submerged site, Late Eastern Lapita pottery has been found. Lapita pottery has distinctive geometric, dentate-stamped designs, which were brought by people from the West who embraced a maritime technology and marine subsistence pattern. They also brought plants such as taro and coconut and carried domesticated animals such as pig, dog, chicken, and the Polynesian rat when they colonised new islands.



The Lapita tradition seems to originate in the Bismarck Archipelago north of mainland New Guinea around 3350 years ago and it spread as far as to Samoa during a period of c. 500 years. Both vessel shape and patterns on the vessels are diagnostic of the type of pottery. Several sites featuring pottery have been found in the Samoan Islands, but except the finds at Mulifanua, the remainder have pottery of the so-called Polynesian plainware type, without decorations. The early plainware is generally finer and more varied in shape and form, than the later. Around 1700-1500 years ago ceramic vessels seem to have gone out of style and the pottery tradition ceased to exist. Pottery was probably replaced by wooden bowls and jars. Microscopic analyses of pot sherds can tell us something about the clay and temper (sand, crushed stone, shells etc. mixed with the clay to make the vessel stronger), such as whether they are local or have been imported from elsewhere. Often it is postulated that societies using pottery are part of an agricultural tradition.

