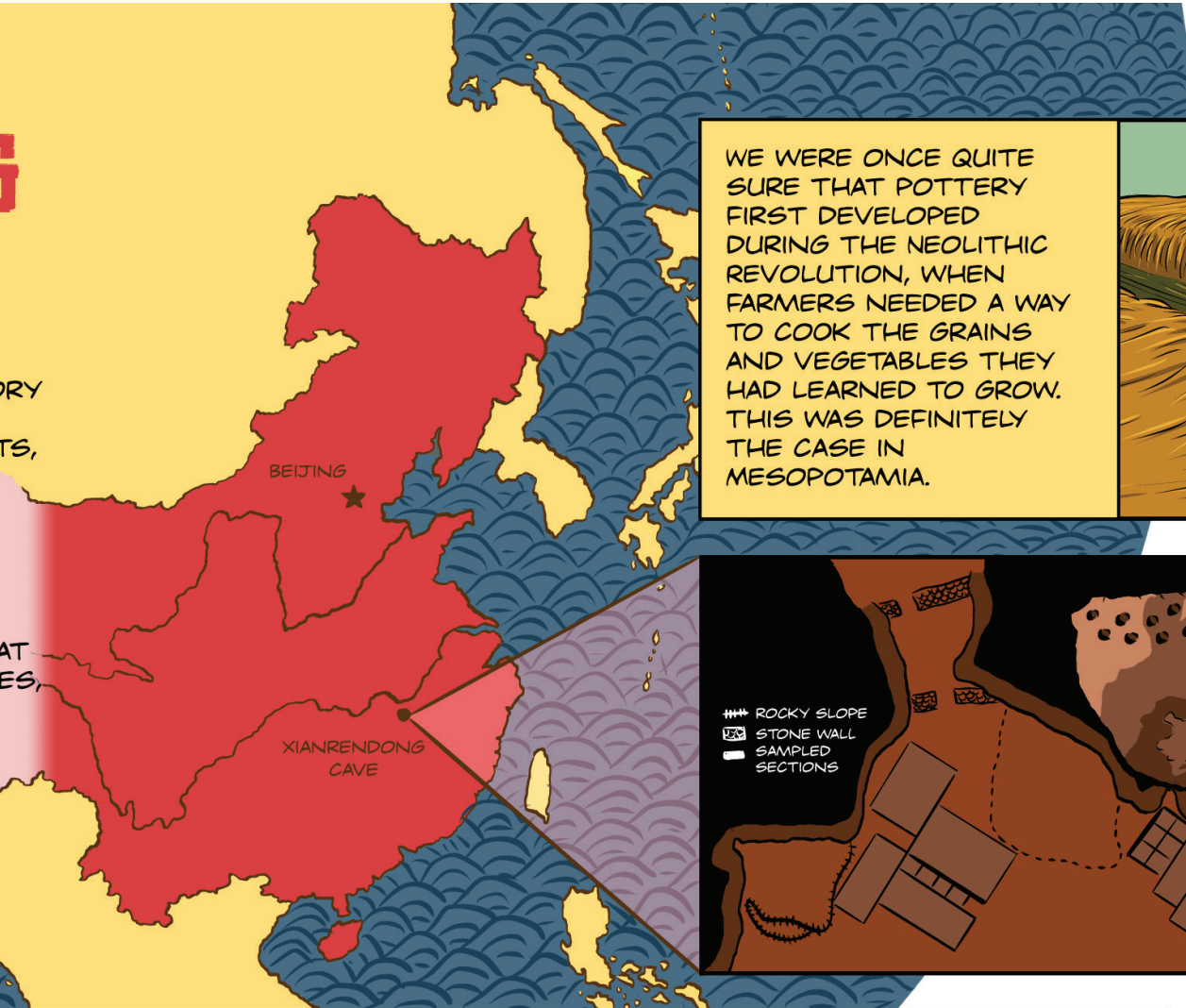


THE XIANRENDONG POTTERY

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FOR THE MOST PART, RESEARCHERS HAVE BUILT UP A STORY OF WORLD HISTORY IN WHICH AGRICULTURE LEADS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF 'SPECIALISTS' - PRIESTS, SOLDIERS, RULERS, AND ARTISANS WHO AREN'T FARMERS, BUT INSTEAD MAKE THINGS. THEY CAN DO SO BECAUSE FARMERS CAN FEED THEM. SO MOST SPECIALIST TECHNOLOGIES LIKE IRON TOOLS, POTTERY, AND WOVEN CLOTH ARRIVE AFTER AGRICULTURE. BUT WAS THAT ALWAYS THE CASE, FOR ALL TECHNOLOGIES, EVERYWHERE? A DISCOVERY IN CHINA SUGGESTS A DIFFERENT STORY IN AT LEAST ONE CASE.

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ARTIST: PETER QUACH



WE WERE ONCE QUITE SURE THAT POTTERY FIRST DEVELOPED DURING THE NEOLITHIC REVOLUTION, WHEN FARMERS NEEDED A WAY TO COOK THE GRAINS AND VEGETABLES THEY HAD LEARNED TO GROW. THIS WAS DEFINITELY THE CASE IN MESOPOTAMIA.



BUT A TEAM OF ARCHAEOLOGISTS WORKING IN CHINA HAS FOUND THAT POTTERY THERE PRECEDED AGRICULTURE BY AT LEAST 10,000 YEARS. IN A CAVE CALLED XIANRENDONG, THEY FOUND SHERDS -- OR PIECES OF POTS -- THAT THEY CAN DATE TO AROUND 20,000 YEARS AGO.

THESE POTS WERE MADE FROM LOCAL CLAY, AND PROBABLY FIRED (HEATED AND DRIED) ON AN OPEN FIRE. THE EARLIEST POTTERY WAS PRETTY PLAIN, BUT LATER POTS HAD DECORATIONS.



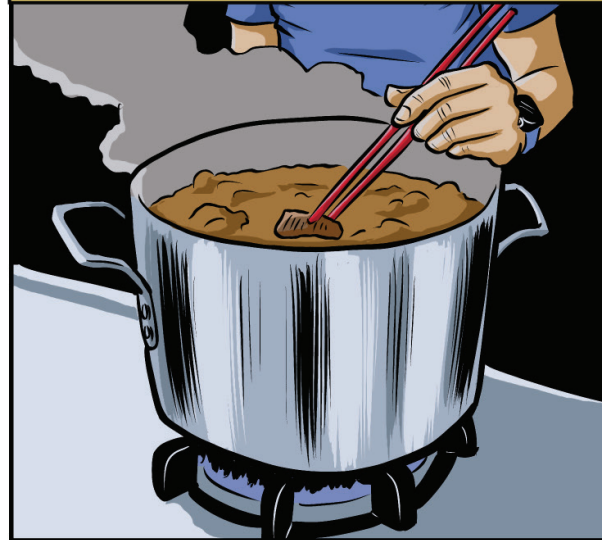
WHY WERE THESE POTS MADE? WHAT WERE THEY USED FOR?



20,000 YEARS AGO WAS THE HEIGHT OF AN ICE AGE, AND FOOD WAS SCARCE. THE PEOPLE IN XIANRENDONG MAY HAVE DEVELOPED POTS IN ORDER TO COOK GRAINS AS SOUPS, OR STEAM THEM IN A WAY THAT GOT THE MOST CALORIES. AT LEAST SOME OF THE POTS HAVE BURN MARKS, INDICATING THEY WERE USED FOR COOKING FOOD.



INTERESTINGLY, CHINESE CUISINE TODAY STILL TENDS TO FOCUS MORE THAN SOME OTHER SOCIETIES ON STEAMING AND COOKING IN POTS RATHER THAN GRILLING OR BAKING. SOME EARLY POTTERY WAS USED FOR OTHER PURPOSES, INCLUDING HOLDING PAINTS OR OTHER CULTURAL OBJECTS.



*WE AREN'T SURE WHAT THE INHABITANTS OF XIANRENDONG CAVE LOOKED LIKE, BUT SCIENTISTS THINK THEY WERE PROBABLY RELATED TO A GROUP OF PEOPLE WHO NOW LIVE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA. SO THAT'S HOW WE HAVE DRAWN THEM.