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Mobilities, Entanglements, Transformations. Pottery Practices in Neolithic Wetland Sites of the Swiss Plateau

Pottery is one of the most commonly used sources in prehistoric archaeology to construct notions of 'cultures' and identities in the past. But with no access to emic perspective of Neolithic societies, questions on cultural and social belongings are rather difficult to answer. By contrast, pottery production practices left a range of traces on the vessels that can be studied archaeologically and archaeometrically (thin section-, (p) XRF-analyses). The material features of pottery vessels thus comprise histories of their making that not only happens in a material landscape but a social context too. Thus, in the process of making pottery, the itineraries of the used materials (geology) and those of the potters (biographies) become intertwined. With that, pottery offers us an entry point to approach entanglements and transformations in past societies which unfolded in contexts of movement and mobility.

In my empirical case studies – the pottery of Neolithic wetland sites at Lake Constance and Lake Zurich (3900–3800 BC) – it can be shown that the commonly made presupposition of 'one settlement-one pottery style' is not tenable. On the contrary, with regularly occurring combinations of different styles at one place –like e.g. 'Hornstaad', 'Cortailod' and 'Schussenried' or 'Cortailod', 'NMB', 'Pfyn' and 'Michelsberg' – stylistic plurality was not the exception but the rule. While some vessels were made and used at the same place adopting locally available materials and typical local production practices ('local vessels'), others were made at other places in different styles and then transported to the sites ('translocal vessels'). Some vessels even show how the mobility of pots and potters led to creative transformations like stylistic appropriations ('inbetween vessels') and thus the (re)negotiation and transformation of temporarily stable cultural forms.