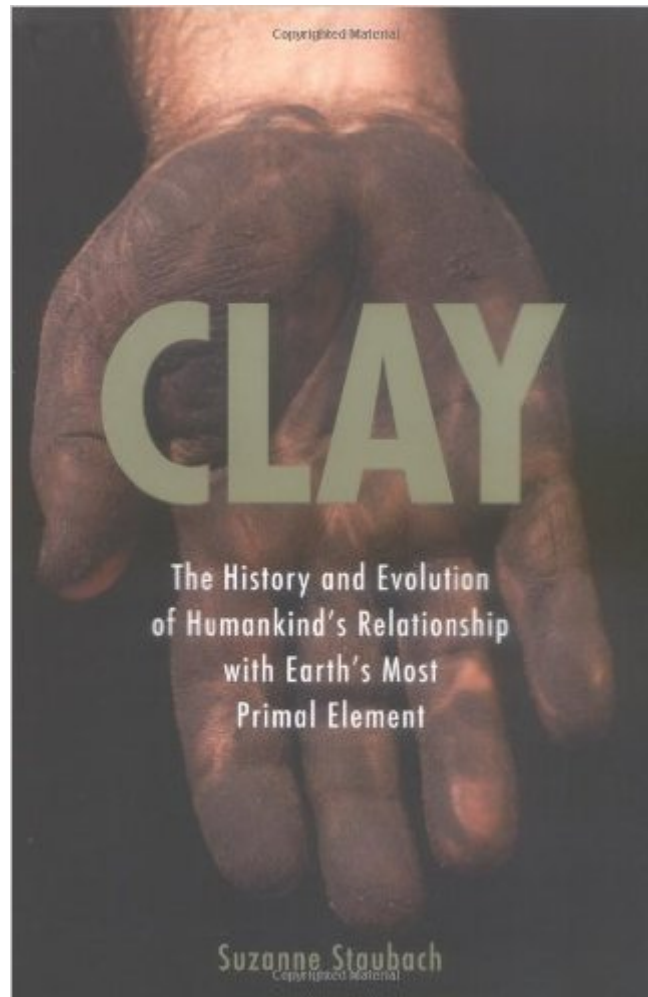


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Clay: The History And Evolution Of Humankind's Relationship With Earth's Most Primal Element



Synopsis

The clay beneath our feet is crucial to the computer and space industries, bio-technology, publishing, and a wide range of manufacturing processes. The potter's wheel was the very first machine. With the invention of pottery came cooking and storage vessels, ceramics, the discovery of alcoholic beverages, the oven, clay tablets for the first written communication, irrigation for agriculture, vast trade networks, plumbing, sanitation, and an incredibly durable building material. Much of the Great Wall of China was made of fired clay bricks-a material that can stand for centuries. Now, Suzanne Staubach presents a lively look at how civilization was built on clay-from the first spark plugs to modern semi-conductors, satellite communications to surgical equipment. Clay is a fascinating, colorful look at how, from the primordial ooze to modern miracles, this most humble of substances continues to shape our world in ways limited only by the human imagination.

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Customer Reviews

The effect of clay on civilization goes far beyond pottery efforts: it's fostered the rise of world trade, the invention of writing, and the construction of cities. It continues to play a vital role in our modern age, yet few outside of potters give it much attention. CLAY: THE HISTORY AND EVOLUTION OF HUMANKIND'S RELATIONSHIP WITH EARTH'S MOST PRIMAL ELEMENT will appeal primarily to any involved in the arts but is also a highly recommended pick for social science and history classes: it provides a lively look on all the elements clay has been essential to fostering, from semiconductors to surgical equipment.

Interesting point: was the wheel invented first for making pottery or for transport? We take, of course, wheels for granted now but the native inhabitants of Americas did not know anything about them. The author assumes that pottery wheel was invented BEFORE transportation wheel - it is quite possible, people had to eat first before they decided to travel. The book is not 'scientific' but summarizes very nicely a lot of original research, most of it quite recent. A casual reader cannot follow the width of the approach but can learn a lot from this author, an active 'potter' herself. The book inspired me to purchase about 10 coffee mugs on the - my previous mugs are getting broken and had to be replaced anyway. The mugs are supposed to be delivered soon, one set is 'fancy', supposed to change color with temperature, the second set is just off-white. I may edit this review again after I get them...I liked the book, four stars and recommended to all who like to go back thousands of years and return. Plastic is now quite popular but cannot be compared to ceramic.

Clay by Suzanne Staubach is an information-packed and interesting look at how one substance - clay - has had far-reaching effects on world history, culture, architecture, cuisine, and technology. Unbelievably abundant, clay (from kleben, German for "to stick to") is alumina, silica, and chemically bonded water. Its popularity through the ages is due to its abundance, plasticity, and its durability after being heated (even sun-baked clay has considerable durability, though unfired clay or raw clay has had a myriad of uses as well). Clay vessels have had a huge role in how humanity has cooked and stored food. With the advent of clay pots, it became possible to make grains and cereals into pottages, tough chunks of meat and tubers into stews, and babies could be weaned earlier thanks to easily-digested mush, which could easily be made in clay pots. Clay vessels made the brewing and consumption of alcohol possible, as pottery enabled the ancient Egyptians to brew ale; the Sumerians date wine; and the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans grape wine. Interestingly, Roman wine was thick and intensely flavored and had to be mixed with water in specially-made clay vessels called kraters before drinking. Clay storage vessels also kept food safe from insects, rodents, and moisture. The first ovens were made of clay, enabling people to bake bread (especially raised bread). The Sumerians developed a large clay beehive oven called a tannur, a type that spread to many other parts of the world, including India, where it came to be called the tandoor. The tandoor is still in use today and tandoori cuisine is popular in many restaurants throughout the world. Also the very first stoves and ranges were made of clay and their remains have been found in ancient Mesopotamian, Chinese, and Roman archaeological sites. Potters became the world's first industrialists, as fired clay was the first synthetic substance ever created and the kiln and the potter's wheel were among the very first machines ever made. Indeed it is possible that the potter's

wheel predates wheels used for transportation. Clay of course allowed people to produce plates, cups, and bowls for the dinner table, particularly after glazes were invented (the ancient Egyptians knew of two types of low-fire glazes, lead and alkaline). It was the Chinese who really advanced the art of producing dinnerware, producing the first porcelain in the Sui dynasty (the 500s AD), though it was the later Ming dynasty (1368-1644) that became truly famous for it, its wonderful blue and white porcelains dishes a popular export commodity. The import of Ming porcelain vastly changed European tastes, leading to by the mid-16th century the need for aristocrats at least to have matching sets of china (as it became known). European potters were not to be outdone; Josiah Spode invented "bone china" or spode ware that thanks to bone ash from cattle had added stability and Josiah Wedgwood pioneered the idea of the assembly line in his potteries and made so much money he was able to finance the researches of his cousin Charles Darwin. Clay was key in the development of writing, as the Sumerians used clay tablets for their cuneiform writing and the world's first printing press with movable type, a Chinese invention of around 1041 BC, used printing blocks made of fired clay. Clay still has an impact on writing today, as clay bonded with graphite makes it more stable, enabling its use in pencils. Clay of course has a huge role as a building material. Clay structural types include wattle-and-daub (a woven structure of sticks or reed is covered with mud), cob (balls or chunks of clay mixed with straw, manure, and sand are stacked into walls and smoothed together), adobe bricks, rammed earth (or pise), and fired or burned brick buildings. Each type of construction is not only ancient but still in use; the famed British buildings of dark beams and contrasting tan or white panels of plaster - "Tudor style" - are wattle-and-daub. The Great Wall of China is actually multiple walls of unfired loess (a type of fine-grained clay), bricks, and burned bricks. Also clay tiles have been used in buildings for thousands of years, dating back to Egyptian times and becoming particularly notable in Islamic architecture in the Middle East and Central Asia, while red terra-cotta roof tiles have become associated with the scenic towns of the Mediterranean, Mexico, and South America. The author showed in chapter after interesting chapter that the uses of clay throughout history have been nearly endless. Clay water pipes and flush toilets have had a huge role in modern sanitation, saving millions of lives from dysentery, typhus, typhoid fever, and cholera. Indeed collectors of Royal Doulton figurines and china might be interested to know that the "Royal" comes from the fact that Sir Henry Doulton was knighted in 1887 for his contributions to public health, as his clay sewer pipes and other sanitary ware greatly improved British life. Clay-lined pit furnaces enabled the invention of smelting, and clay crucibles were vital in producing molds so that metal tools, pots, and weapons could be cast. Clay was used as insulation in the first internal combustion engines, particularly with spark plugs. Clay has had a major role in so

many products, including early successful false teeth (they replaced inferior wooden, bone, or horn teeth, all of which absorbed stains and eventually putrefied and stank), smoking pipes (even many of those made of stone, pipestone, were really made of clay, as pipestone was known from upper Missouri River region of southwest Minnesota and was once clay, compressed into stone by the weight of Ice Age glaciers), fertility rituals (the clay figurine the Venus of Dolni Vestonice dates back 30,000 years), cremation urns, hearths to heat the home, and grave goods (including my favorite, the 9,000 strong terra-cotta army of the First Emperor of Qin who died in 210 BC, 7,000 soldiers and 2,000 horses so accurately rendered that even the underside of the shoes of the soldiers have tread).

I have owned this book for several years and I read and refer back to Staubach's finding often. A great and insightful read. I recommended it to geologists, artists, historians, naturalists or anyone who appreciates any one or all of the previous.

I first saw this book while traveling as a hotel book. I started it but didn't finish it so upon returning home I purchased it. It is extremely well done, covers details and directions in history that clay has taken. I would recommend this book to anyone who works with clay, either for work or for pleasure.

I really enjoyed this wide-ranging and well-written book about wet, dry and baked mud's service to humanity, mud's more animate cousin. I highly recommend "Clay" for students, potters, ceramic collectors and the wider public.

I thought it was a good general book on ceramic technology, history, and uses of pottery. There is something for everyone here.

Good read

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