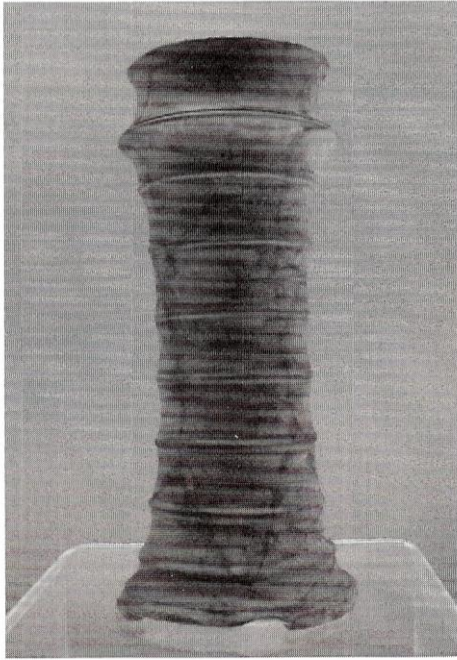


## Letter to Editor

### A Songze Jar

During a recent trip to China I was reminded of the suggested ancestry of the classic concave-shaped albarello pharmacy jar. The sight of the casual use of simple sections of bamboo stem for containers verified their practicability and distinctive shape. However a subsequent visit to a remarkable museum excited my interest further. The Shanghai Museum contains a staggering collection of Chinese cultural



relics that emphasises the continuity of an ancient culture in bronze work, painting, calligraphy and ceramics. Among the artefacts was a familiar shaped jar, labelled as a 'Grey Pottery Bamboo-Shaped Vase; Songze Culture'.

The historic influence of the 'west' through the Silk Road is clear in China. This was most obvious during my visit to the city of Xi'an that was the ancient capital and eastern destination of the trade route. Not only was it the point of entry for Buddhist texts into the country but also for the pomegranate tree that was introduced from the Middle East and is a feature of the region. Along the long trade route from China, exports such as raw drugs arrived in Afghanistan, Persia and the rest of the Arab world stored in practical bamboo containers. It is not very likely that precious and fragile pottery containers, such as the Songze jar, would itself have been an item of transcontinental trade. However, its existence shows the step from 'plant technology' to mimicking manmade artefact had already been taken in China. The same step is said to have occurred in the Arab world to create jars which were in turn to inspire the Italian pharmacy jars from the 16th century onwards, the most extravagant of which are the familiar majolica ware. In addition to supporting the theory of the bamboo origins of the albarello form, the Songze jar also prompts another theory, that the Silk Road might have carried the idea of making durable and desirable manmade copies in clay. But in what era of Chinese history was the finely-worked jar made? I recommend the Shanghai Museum if you wish to get some perspective of China's historical time scale: the exhibit's label explained that Songze culture flourished in the plains of the lower Yangtse river between 3800–3200 BC.

**Gareth Evans** Member

May 2008

---