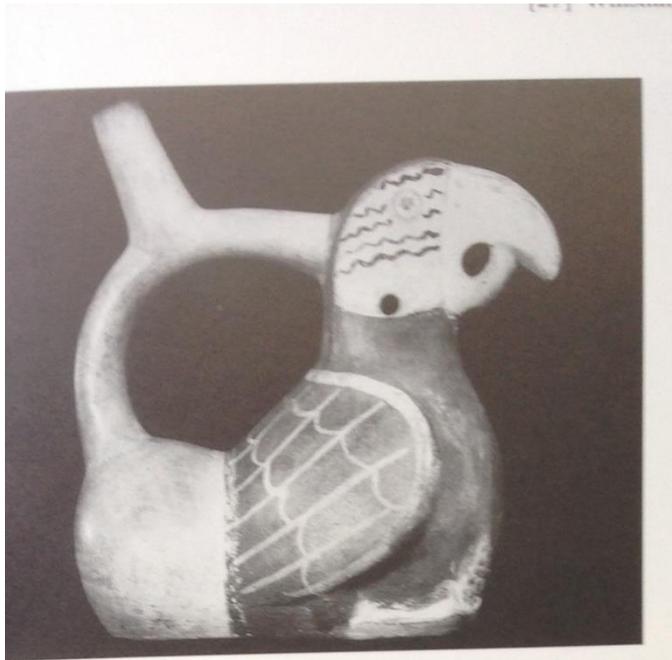


## A Peruvian Whistling Duck (2000 years old)



This strange-looking vessel was made in Peru, probably some time between 100 BC and 200 AD. It was made by the Vicus people – a culture that was located on the northern coast of Peru. Vicus pottery is notable for vessels with strap handles like this and also the use of what has been described as ‘negative decoration’, which we would probably call resist techniques. If you look closely at the wavy lines on the back of this duck and also the crosses on its tail you will see that they have been made by placing some sort of resist material on the surface and then smoke firing it. After the firing the resist is removed, leaving light coloured bands where the smoke could not reach the surface. According to Peruvian archaeologists this technique was only used on vessels for the ‘social elite’, presumably because it was time consuming and tricky.

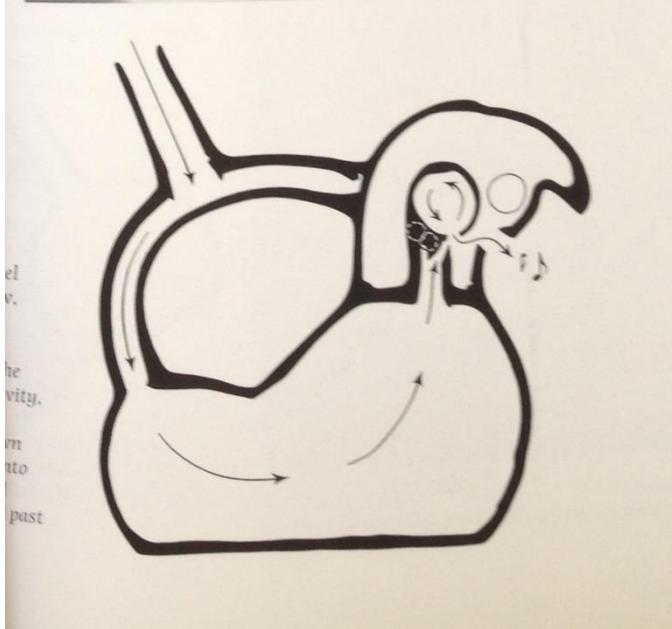
The other notable characteristic of Vicus pottery is that a lot of it whistles! Whistling pots were made by several Peruvian cultures, up to modern times, but the Vicus were probably the first. Two types of whistling pot were made – some had two chambers, so that when one chamber was filled with a liquid and the pot was tipped, the liquid would flow into the other chamber, pushing air across the whistle inside. The others, of which this duck is an example, had a single chamber and the whistling sound was made by blowing – in this case through the tail.



The whistling mechanism, which must have been quite tricky to make, is best seen by X-raying one of these whistling pots. The pictures to the left are taken from Freestone and Gaimster's book, *Pottery in the Making*. They show a slightly more recent vessel (Moche culture, AD 100 – 700) in the form of a macaw. The top picture is a normal photo, the one in the middle is an X-ray image and the bottom one is a diagram, explaining how the whistle works. The small chamber inside the head has a hole which the air is blown across, making the whistling sound.



You can't help wondering why they made these whistling pots. Almost all of them have been found as funerary offerings, so it is tempting to conclude that they had some ritual purpose during the funeral – maybe whistling the soul into the afterlife. However, deliberately buried items are much more likely to survive than those used in the home or in festivals, so their use may not have been limited to funerals.



When I bought this duck it had a substantial crack in the main chamber, which you can see in the picture on the previous page, and it wouldn't whistle. When I got it home I filled the crack with epoxy, blew down the tail and produced a very musical note. I don't know when the duck was broken, but I like to think that it was cracked when it was buried, or even before, and that I was the first person to hear the note of that duck in 2000 years. It is not often that you can hear exactly the same man-made sound that was heard by people 2000 years ago.

For some time I thought that the rippling markings on the duck's back were intended to represent water – since it was a duck. However, a friend of mine pointed out that there is actually a class of real ducks that are called whistling ducks, because of the characteristic whistling sound they make. One of these, the fulvous whistling duck, is actually found in Peru. She sent me a picture of one:



Suddenly the decoration on my duck made sense. The wavy lines on the back of my duck represent the light and dark brown banding on the back of the real duck and the narrow horizontal band of white slip across the middle of my duck represents the band of white feathers that separates the darker wings from the lighter underbelly of the real duck. So what I appear to have is a 2000-year-old representation of a real Peruvian duck, which is also known for its whistling! I did wonder if the sound my duck makes is similar to that of the real duck, but I found that the whistle of the real duck has a much higher pitch.

Kevin Akhurst