

PROCEEDINGS
OF THE
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN
SOCIETY

(INCORPORATING THE CAMBS & HUNTS
ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY)



VOLUME LXXIII

for 1984

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Published by the Cambridge Antiquarian Society (incorporating the Cambs and Hunts Archaeological Society)

ISSN 0309-3606

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THREE ANGLO-SAXON CREMATATIONS FROM GIRTON, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

C. J. ARNOLD AND J. L. WILKINSON

In 1874 T. Simpson Jones donated three Anglo-Saxon cremation urns and their contents to the Powysland Museum, Welshpool, Powys. According to the museum catalogue the collection in the nineteenth century was remarkably varied and cosmopolitan.¹ However, as a result of the loss of items from the museum, the National Museum of Wales accepted responsibility for safe-keeping elements of the collection in 1961. These items have now been returned, including the three cremations which form the basis of this note.

T. Simpson Jones (1853–1937) was a gentleman of Welshpool, founder and first secretary of the Powysland Club, who was educated at Trinity College, Cambridge before entering Lincoln's Inn in 1880.² It seems likely that the items he donated to the museum were collected whilst he was studying at Cambridge, although only the cremations now survive. Apart from items of geological and zoological interest, including a stuffed cygnet killed on the Cam, Jones also donated Anglo-Saxon spearheads and amber beads from Cambridgeshire.³

The Museum catalogue provides brief details of the discovery of the cremations which, although from an unlikely source, may add to knowledge of the Girton cemetery.⁴ Jones may have acquired the urns in 1871 when work was in progress on the College.⁵

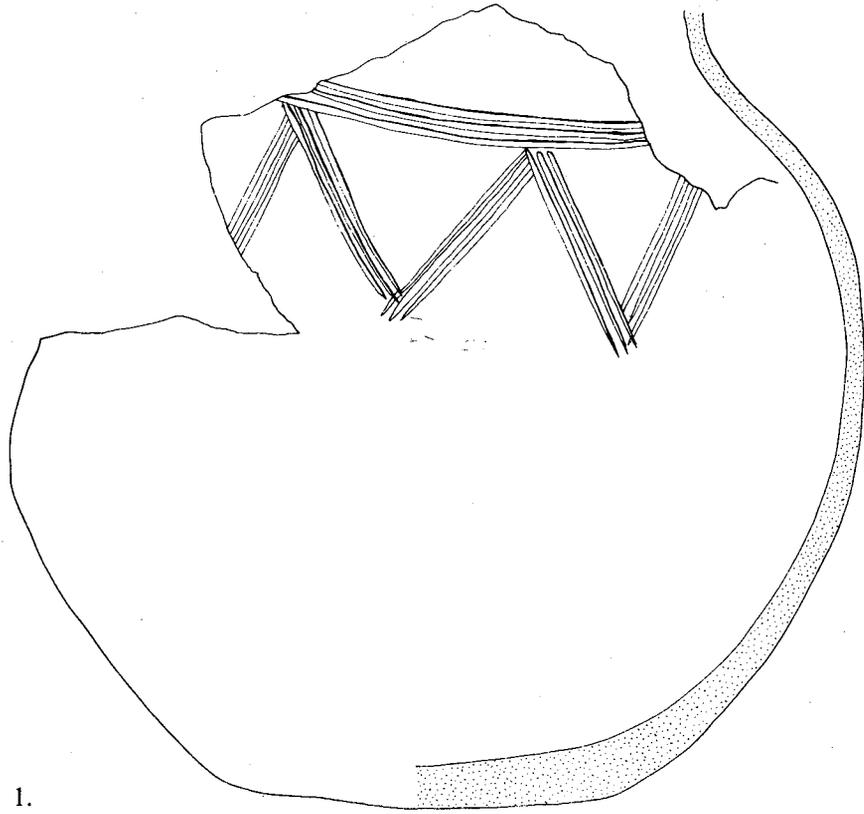
Three cinerary urns, probably Anglo-Saxon, found at Girton. About a mile and a half out of Cambridge, on the Huntingdon road, whilst draining the grounds of the Ladies' college at Girton, the workmen struck into a number of cinerary urns, five of which at least were completely destroyed; however these three were preserved, and are tolerably perfect, one being nearly perfect, and the other two can be pieced so as to show the size and shape of the vessels. The trenches in which they were found were from eighteen inches to two feet in depth.⁶

The descriptions given of the vessels match the three extant vessels precisely, except that faint decoration on one was overlooked. However, few of the grave-goods survive, and they and the cremated bone are contained in two bags with a variety of labels. Given the recent history of this group there must be doubts about the integrity of the samples. Analysis of the bones does in fact suggest that the contents have in part been mixed. For the purposes of presentation and documentation the vessels and the bone samples will be considered separately and the original urn numbers used. The vessels are not listed in Myres' *Corpus*.⁷

The Cremation Vessels

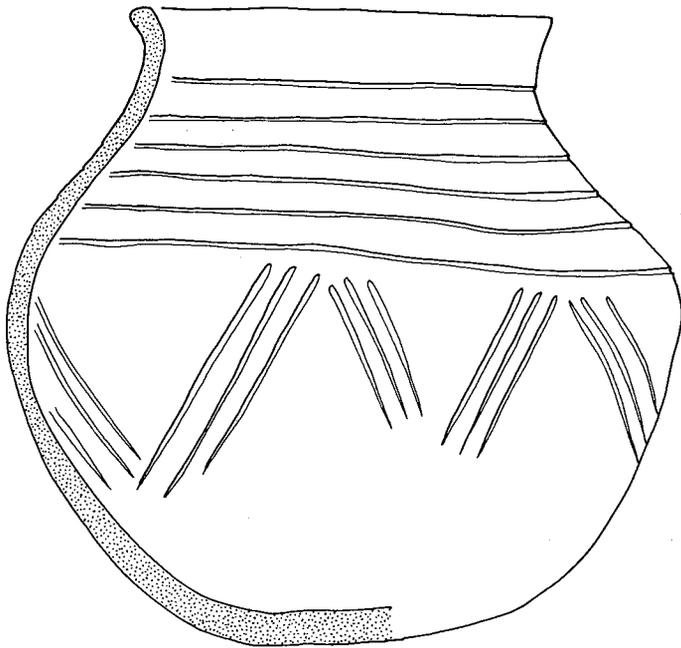
1. *Pot.* Catalogued as 'the largest urn eight inches high...and nine inches diameter in the bulge...with no ornamentation'.⁸ This is identified with the vessel (Figure 1) which is globular, the rim absent, dark grey vesicular fabric. Decoration is present in the form of three very lightly tooled, continuous horizontal necklines above three-line pendant triangles. Max. Diam. 225 mm, h. max. diam. 99 mm.

2. *Pot.* Described as being 'seven and a half inches high on top of rim...and seven inches diameter...between the bulge and the neck, it is encircled by six rude lines, and below, similar rude lines are drawn in zig-zag form down to the base'.⁹ The vessel (Figure 2) is sub-biconical in a dark grey fabric with sparse surface grit, the base slightly rounded. The decoration on the neck and shoulders consists of six continuous tooled lines, above three-line pendant triangles. H. 170 mm, max. diam.



1.

Figure 1. Girton: cremation urn '1'. Scale 1:2.



2.

Figure 2. Girton: cremation urn '2'. Scale 1:2.

180 mm, h. max. diam. 88 mm, rim diam. 113 mm.

Grave-goods. Described as 'a piece of bone comb, and small iron tweezers, both...lost'.¹⁰

3. *Pot.* The vessel was described as being 'four and a half inches in height, and its diameter...six inches, and at the orifice four and a half inches... The neck is encircled by two rude lines, between which are thirty circular impressions like Maltese crosses; from the centre of the bulge, on which are six slight protuberances at equal distances, there are lines running to the base, between which lines are impressions as above, and various other impressions.'¹¹ The bowl is dark grey and buff in a fine fabric, with shoulder bosses, decorated with a row of stamps between single continuous necklines, the vertical bosses emphasised by two or three vertical lines on each side. There are stamps on the bosses and in the intervening areas. H. 120 mm, max. diam. 157 mm, h. max. diam. 65 mm, rim diam. 108 mm.

Stamps. A4aii, A1a, A5gi, A5d.¹²

Grave-goods. With the burnt bones were 'a glass bead of a greenish blue colour, and two fragments of glass, which seem to be half melted beads'.¹³

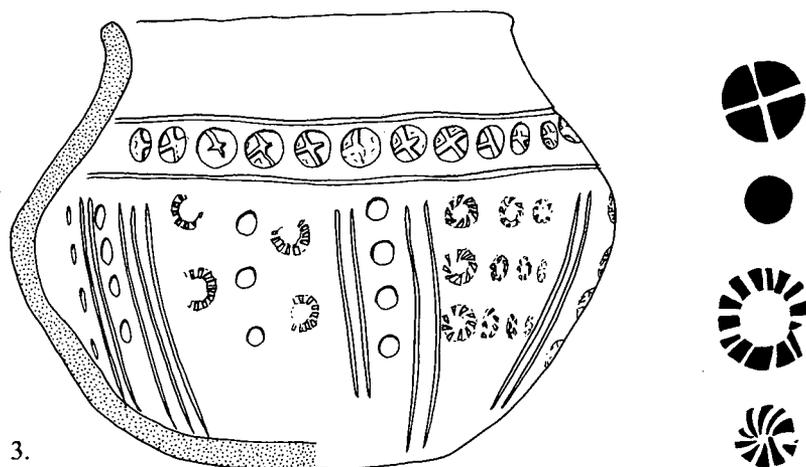


Figure 3. Girton: cremation urn '3'. Scale: pot 1:2; stamp impressions 1:1.

The Cremated Bone and Grave-goods (not illustrated)

The cremated bone and fragmentary grave-goods were contained in two bags; that described here as Sample A was within vessel 1 and contained also two sherds belonging to that vessel. The other, Sample B, was in vessel 2 with three joining sherds from vessel 2 and four sherds of pottery which are not Anglo-Saxon.

A. General. Mostly white in colour, about 10% charred, moderately crushed. Total weight, 435 g.

Skull. Forty-two fragments, mostly of vault, the largest 4 x 4 cm, maximum thickness 7 mm; includes frontal, parietal, occipital and squamous temporal bones. The few sutures present were probably fused endosteally. Eight charred bones, also the thickest, are parietal and occipital. Two zygomatic fragments include part of the orbital margin. Three ethmoid and 1 maxillary fragments. One 3.5 cm charred piece of left petrous temporal bone. No tooth, 1 possible mandibular fragment.

Vertebrae. One thoracic transverse process, 1 spinous process, 10 pieces of cancellous bone, possibly from vertebral bodies.

Ribs. Articular heads of 3 ribs, 1 charred fragment of shaft.

Upper limbs. One 4 cm piece of charred lateral border of scapula. Humeri: 1 piece of upper and 1 of lower articular surface, 15 shaft fragments, cortex up to 4 mm thick. Forearm bones: lower articular surfaces of left radius, charred, 1 large-diameter (male-type) fragment of radial head, 2 pieces of charred radial shaft, 4 uncharred shaft fragments. Eight probable shaft fragments of ulna. (See also Sample B below.)

Pelvis and lower limbs. Hip bones: 2 pieces of acetabular surface with large, male-type concavity. One ischial tuberosity and a piece of pubic bone. Six pieces of cancellous bone. Femora: 16 shaft fragments, 3 of which are charred, maximum length 4.8 cm, generally robust, 4.5 mm thick, but 8 mm thick at linea aspera; appear to be of fairly large diameter though no cross-section of the shaft is intact. Tibiae: 2 pieces of tibial plateau and 2 of shaft. Fibulae: 3 robust shaft fragments of intact circumference and 1 of lower end. Feet: 1 charred second metatarsal, distal shaft and head and one other metatarsal fragment. No phalanges.

Other bones. Forty-eight unidentified long bone fragments less than 2 cm in length.

Conclusions. Sex: male according to thickness of skull, humeral shaft cortex, femoral diameters and estimated acetabular size. Age: adult, probably over 30 years according to fusion of skull sutures, though this is an unreliable

criterion. All bones are of adult proportions. Pathology: nil noted. Type of cremation: the presence of so much charring suggests that the amount of fuel was barely adequate. The distribution of charring suggests that the body was lying on its right side and that the head and lower extremities were away from the centre of heat.

Grave-goods. One piece of flint 15 × 8 mm, 1 piece of cowrie shell, probably *Cypraea tigris* L.,¹⁴ 6 substantial, and many small fragments of iron. One at least is thin, curving sheet metal 1 mm thick, too fragmentary for identification.

B. *General.* Overall white colour. Total weight, 341 g. There are 8 charred fragments which are considered to be from Sample A.

Skull. Thirty fragments, mostly of vault, the largest being 3.6 × 3 cm. All of slender build. The midline vault is 3 mm thick, but many fragments are only 2 mm thick. Two sutures are unfused, 1 suture probably fronto-parietal is fused endosteally. One ethmoid, 2 maxillary and 3 mandibular fragments. One damaged molar crown, some enamel persisting, probably unerupted (? third molar).

Ribs. Five fragments, up to 2.6 cm long.

Vertebrae and pelvic bones. Nil.

Upper limbs. Humeri: 1 3.4 cm piece of upper articular surface, 1 piece of lower articular surface. Six shaft fragments, the largest 4 cm long and 3 mm thick. Forearm bones: 16 small fragments of shafts. Hand: one head of proximal phalanx.

Lower limbs. Femora: 4 pieces of lower (condylar) surface, 32 shaft fragments up to 5.4 cm long, generally about 4.5 mm thick, 8 mm at linea aspera. Tibiae: 3 fragments of tibial plateau, 4 pieces of shaft up to 6 cm long. Fibulae: 5 shaft fragments up to 4.2 cm long. Feet: 3 probable pieces of metatarsal shaft, one damaged metatarsal head.

Other bones. Thirty-eight small fragments of long bone of indeterminate location. *Note.* Eight charred fragments of femoral shaft (3), ulna (2), radius (1), skull vault (1) and one indeterminate are much more robust than all others in Sample B but consistent with those in Sample A, and are probably resultant upon accidental intermingling, probably after excavation.

Conclusions. Sex: female, according to thickness of vault, femoral and humeral shafts. Age: young adult (?20–25 years) on basis of unerupted molar crown and thin skull bones with some sutures unfused. Pathology: nil noted. Cremation: probably more efficient than for Sample A.

Grave-goods. Three joining fragments of iron, forming fine rectangular-sectioned bar with one broken and one pointed end, and one fragment bent over into U shape, 56 mm long, max. 7 mm wide, possibly part of pair of tweezers. One pierced spheroid glass bead 6 mm diam. burnt light brown. One flint flake, 10 × 9 mm.

Discussion

A comparison of the original descriptions of the urns and their contents with what pertains today suggests that a degree of confusion has arisen. There is no mention of cremated bone or grave-goods with vessel 1, but they are mentioned with 2 and 3. We may therefore assume that the two samples of bone reflect the original situation. Both bone samples contain iron fragments, but they cannot be shown to be from the same artefact; however, only vessel 2 is claimed to have had an iron artefact, described as tweezers. Fragments of what *might* be tweezers were located in Sample B. Vessel 3 contained a glass bead, which may be the bead also located in Sample B. This might lead to the conclusion that the two samples have been mixed, but only partially, because apart from the eight stray bone fragments in Sample B the integrity of the bone samples does not appear to be in doubt.

However, to leave the matter there would be to accept two fundamental assumptions. One is that all the grave-goods were originally found; those located may not be those originally described, and the bead and iron fragments may be additional to those originally listed. The comb fragment and iron tweezers from vessel 2 were originally described as lost. The colour of the glass bead is specified, whereas that listed here has been burnt and is light brown, not blue-green. While there are the bones of two individuals in bone Sample B, this does not necessarily imply that mixing has taken place, as the presence of more than one individual in cremation urns has been suggested elsewhere.¹⁵ On balance it would seem that the grave-goods originally described have been lost, that mixing of the bone samples is not definite, and that it is not possible to assign bone samples to their respective vessels.

Little can be said about the surviving grave-goods because of their fragmentary nature. The cowrie shell in Sample B can be added to the list of about 25 occurrences of cowries of Mediterranean or more easterly origin. As here, few identifications of the genus of cowrie have been definite. Their distribution is concentrated in areas of England, the Yorkshire Wolds, Kent and the Cambridge region, with sporadic occurrences westwards into Wiltshire. The symbolism of cowrie shells in antiquity has recently been discussed.¹⁶

The types of form and decoration represented in the three urns are relatively common, especially those with horizontal and diagonal decoration. Urns with bosses, as in the case of urn 3, are generally

dated late in the pagan period by Myres,¹⁷ and those with such incised decoration, as seen in urns 1 and 2, are of less specific date. In an analysis of the relationship between urn shape and decoration¹⁸ it has been suggested that wide pots are earlier in the period than narrow examples (particularly because of the rarity of stamped decoration on narrow vessels); bosses tend to occur on wide urns whilst diagonal decoration is predominantly found on narrow and medium-width vessels. Stamped decoration occurs mostly on narrow types. The study of such patterning is in its infancy; they are not in themselves designed to be a dating tool for all cremation urns.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful to Miss M. Daniels (Curator, Powysland Museum, Welshpool) for bringing this material to their attention, and Drs C. Mettam (Department of Zoology, University College, Cardiff) and G. Oliver (National Museum of Wales) for examining the cowrie shell.

NOTES

- 1 *Powysland Museum. Catalogue of Articles and Books* (Welshpool, 1875).
- 2 Obituary: *Montgomery County Times and Oswestry Advertiser*, 16 December 1937.
- 3 Anon. 'Powysland Museum Catalogue 1922', *Montgomeryshire Collections* XL (1928), 20.
- 4 E. J. Hollingworth and M. M. O'Reilly, *The Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Girton College, Cambridge* (Cambridge, 1925).
- 5 For further references and mention of the 1871 findings see A. Meaney, *A Gazetteer of Early Anglo-Saxon Burial Sites* (London, 1974), pp. 65–6.
- 6 *Powysland Catalogue*, p. xlviii.
- 7 J. N. L. Myres, *A Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Pottery of the Pagan Period* (Cambridge, 1977).
- 8 *Powysland Catalogue*, p. xlviii.
- 9 *Ibid.* p. xlix.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*
- 12 T. Briscoe, 'Anglo-Saxon pot stamps', in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 2 (eds D. Brown, J. Campbell and S. C. Hawkes) (B.A.R. Brit. Ser. 92, Oxford, 1981), pp. 1–36.
- 13 *Powysland Catalogue*, p. xlix.
- 14 Identification by Drs C. Mettam, Department of Zoology, University College Cardiff and G. Oliver, National Museum of Wales.
- 15 L. Wilkinson, 'Problems of analysis and interpretation of skeletal remains', in *Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries 1979* (eds P. Rahtz, T. Dickinson and L. Watts) (B.A.R. Brit. Ser. 82, Oxford, 1980), pp. 221–32.
- 16 J. Huggett, "'Prestige" grave-goods and the pagan Anglo-Saxon economy A.D. 450–650', unpublished B.A. thesis (University of Leeds, 1982), pp. 27–9; A. L. Meaney, *Anglo-Saxon Amulets and Curing Stones* (B.A.R. Brit. Ser. 96, Oxford, 1981), pp. 123–8.
- 17 Myres, *op. cit.*; *idem*, *Anglo-Saxon Pottery and the Settlement of England* (Oxford, 1969).
- 18 J. D. Richards, 'Anglo-Saxon pot shapes: cognitive investigations', *Science and Archaeology* xxiv (1982), 33–46.

