

THE PREHISTORIC POTTERY FROM MAM TOR: FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS

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INTRODUCTION

The Mam Tor hillfort is one of the best known archaeological monuments in Derbyshire, and the 1965-1969 excavations conducted by Manchester University have provided critical information about the chronology and nature of hillfort settlement in northern England (Coombs, 1967, 1971; Coombs and Thompson, 1979). This paper discusses a sample of the pottery from these excavations, which was found in large quantities in Hut Platforms 1-4, in smaller quantities in Hut Platforms 5 and 8, in the depression X, and in Area VI behind the rampart. Pottery known previously from the site had been termed 'Brigantian Ware' (Bartlett and Preston, 1956: 113). The material from the Manchester excavations has been dated to c. 1000-800 b.c. and described generally as 'typically coarse and thick, heavy gritted, and rough hand worked' (Challis and Harding, 1975: 33). In the main excavation report there is a more detailed description of the colour and form of the rim and base sherds, and of the occurrence of noticeable grits (Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 30-41). The fabrics are all very similar at initial inspection, and a detailed fabric analysis was undertaken to test this assumption, following the method outlined by Peacock (1977). It was hoped that such an analysis would provide insights into the technological skills of the Mam Tor potters (if local production was attested) and perhaps into the organisation of production as well. Petrological inclusions in the pottery (their most idiosyncratic or 'socially distinctive' feature, as each potter would have had his or her own ideas as to which grits to add) were identified with the aid of an x20 binocular microscope.

RESULTS

The pottery can be divided very generally into coarser and finer fabrics according to eight criteria: colour, feel, hardness, fracture, frequency of inclusions, sorting of inclusions, average size of inclusions, and petrology. Twenty-five fabric groups were distinguished according to various combinations of six inclusions: iron ore, limestone, feldspar, quartz, flint and grog. These fabric groups are listed in Table 1, together with their frequency. As can be seen, most sherds belong to the first twelve of the fabrics, and most of the other fabrics are represented by just one or two sherds. The distribution of the various fabrics and of the different quantities of sherds across the site indicates three distinct patterns which are discussed in the following section. First, the pottery is not distributed equally over the excavated area of the hillfort (Table 2); second, the different fabrics are not distributed evenly across the site (Table 3); and third, the dominant fabric on the site as a whole (Fabric 1) is not dominant in any of Platforms 1-4, all of which contain large numbers of sherds (Table 4).

DISCUSSION

The differential distribution of the pottery on the site (Table 2) may simply be related to the different sizes of the areas excavated on the various hut platforms — thus only small quantities of pottery came from Hut Platforms 5 and 8. However, on this hypothesis we would expect Hut Platforms 6, 7 and 9 to produce similar quantities of pottery, yet they produced none. Again, we would expect Hut Platform 1 to produce most pottery since it was totally excavated, but in fact it only contained 14% of the total assemblage compared with 33% from Hut Platform 4.

One attractive explanation could be that the differences are related to different uses

of the huts: at the late bronze age settlement of Black Patch in Sussex, for example, Drewett (1979) identified different hut uses from variations in their artefact assemblages. Although such details of artefact distribution are not available in the main site report, there are some indications of functional variation at Mam Tor. Hut Platforms 1-4 are of similar size (5-6 metres in diameter) and all produced considerable quantities of pottery, so they may have had similar functions. Interestingly, both Hut Platforms 2 and 3 had internal hearths (Challis and Harding, 1975: 144). Hut Platform 4 contained a basket-lined pit for cereal storage (Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 24), and the other three structures also contained pits which, although they did not contain any grain, may also have been used for grain storage. Hut Platform 1 was markedly untidier than Hut Platform 4, the inhabitants of which cleared away the rubbish from the central living area. The difference suggests that the same group of people were not responsible for the deposits in every hut.

| <i>Fabric</i> | <i>Petrology</i> | <i>Number of sherds</i> | <i>% of total sherds on site</i> |
|---------------|---|-------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1 | Feldspar Iron-ore | 228 | 19.8 |
| 2 | Grog Feldspar Iron-ore | 203 | 17.6 |
| 3 | Feldspar Iron-ore Limestone | 125 | 10.8 |
| 4 | Iron-ore | 116 | 10.1 |
| 5 | Grog Iron-ore | 108 | 9.4 |
| 6 | Iron-ore Limestone | 102 | 8.8 |
| 7 | Limestone Quartz | 40 | 3.5 |
| 8 | Grog Iron-ore Limestone | 33 | 2.9 |
| 9 | Feldspar Iron-ore Quartz | 28 | 2.4 |
| 10 | Iron-ore Quartz | 25 | 2.2 |
| 11 | Grog Iron-ore Quartz | 24 | 2.1 |
| 12 | Feldspar Grog Iron-ore Limestone | 13 | 1.8 |
| 13 | Limestone | 8 | 1.1 |
| 14 | Feldspar Grog Iron-ore Quartz | 3 | 0.7 |
| 15 | Flint Iron-ore Limestone | 2 | 0.2 |
| 16 | Flint Iron-ore Limestone Quartz | 2 | 0.2 |
| 17 | Feldspar Iron-ore Limestone Quartz | 2 | 0.2 |
| 18 | Feldspar Grog Iron-ore Limestone Quartz | 2 | 0.2 |
| 19 | Grog | 1 | 0.1 |
| 20 | Flint Grog Limestone Quartz | 1 | 0.1 |
| 21 | Grog Limestone | 1 | 0.1 |
| 22 | Feldspar Grog Limestone | 1 | 0.1 |
| 23 | Feldspar Grog | 1 | 0.1 |
| 24 | Grog Limestone Quartz | 1 | 0.1 |
| 25 | Feldspar Flint Iron-ore | 1 | 0.1 |
| | | 1070 | |

Table 1: The pottery from Mam Tor: fabric types and frequencies.

Coombs and Thompson (1979: 18) argue that the radiocarbon dates and the thin stratigraphy together indicate that Mam Tor was occupied for a short time, further support for the thesis that the huts were inhabited by different groups at the same time, probably by different families. The differences in the fabrics (Table 3) could therefore be explained in terms of the social factors which governed production. It is assumed that a pastoralist subsistence strategy was practised by the Mam Tor community, which was unlikely to have produced the surplus necessary to support pottery specialists (Hart, 1981). Virtually all the pottery is coarse and poorly finished, and it therefore seems likely that the pottery was manufactured at the household level by individual domestic groups, with individual idiosyncracies and preferences causing wide variations in clay/grit composition and with different fabric groups dominating in different huts.

All the grits used in the coarse wares which dominate on the site would have been

| | <i>% of pottery</i> |
|------------|---------------------|
| Platform 1 | 14.40 |
| 2 | 26.98 |
| 3 | 21.33 |
| 4 | 33.55 |
| 5 | 0.27 |
| 6 | 0 |
| 7 | 0 |
| 8 | 0.09 |
| 9 | 0 |
| Area X | 0.73 |
| Y | 0 |
| VI | 2.19 |

Table 2: The pottery from Mam Tor: distribution of sherds in the excavated areas.

| Fabric No: | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 15 | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 22 | 23 | 24 | 25 | |
|------------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|---|
| Platform | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | |
| | 2 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 4 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | 5 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | 8 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Area | X | 1 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | VI | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Table 3: The pottery from Mam Tor: distribution of fabrics (presence-1; absence-0) in the excavated areas.

| Order of dominance: | 1st | 2nd | 3rd | 4th | 5th | 6th | 7th | 8th | 9th | 10th | 11th | 13th | 14th | 15th |
|---------------------|-----|-----|------|-----|-----|-----|-------|------------------------------|-------|--------|------|------|------|--------|
| Platform | 1 | 1 | 3 | 6 | 2 | 4 | 5 | 8, 9, 11 12, 22, 23 24 | | | | | | |
| | 2 | 6 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 | 8 | 7, 14 | 5, 9 | | | | |
| | 3 | 4 | 1 | 5 | 2 | 9 | 3 | 7, 8 | 6 | 16, 19 | | | | |
| | 4 | 2 | 7 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 16, 8 | 11 | 6 | 11 | 9 | 13 | 10 | 3 |
| | 5 | 1 | 6 | | | | | | | | | | | 13 |
| | 8 | 5 | | | | | | | | | | | | 20, 25 |
| Area | X | 1 | 4, 6 | 3 | | | | | | | | | | |
| | VI | 5 | 6 | 16 | 21 | | | | | | | | | |

Table 4: The pottery from Mam Tor: relative frequencies of fabric types in the excavated areas.

available within a five kilometre radius, which is the area ethnographers have found to be the normal limit from which clays and grits are gathered (Howard, 1981). Gritstone, sandstone, limestone, basalt lava, tuff, dolerite, and agglomerate are the potential grits in the area. Quartz and iron ore are fairly ubiquitous in clay and other deposits, although they are not shown on the O.S. geological maps of the area. The clay probably came from the valley of the Derwent river. There are few finer wares. Four sherds of a finer ware (with plastic decoration in the form of a raised ring) were found in one pit in Hut Platform 4, with at least two pots represented according to rim sherds (Coombs

and Thompson, 1979: fig.23); such wares might indicate the work of part-time or even full-time specialist craftsmen (or women), but again the grits used were available locally. The inhabitants of Hut Platform 4 may well have produced them by copying the decorations on pots seen elsewhere, or perhaps metal vessels with handles (Challis and Harding, 1975: 34).

If the argument by Challis and Harding (1975) is preferred, that the site was occupied for a long period, the differences in the fabrics would have to be explained in chronological terms. If each hut is of a different date, then the dominance of a different fabric in each hut could be interpreted as the result of changing fashions. The variety of fabrics in each hut could also be regarded as the result of changes in types of grit over time. However, it remains true that the Mam Tor stratigraphy is very thin, and the variety of fabrics in each layer is difficult to explain if the deposits built up very slowly, with temporal differences between deposition episodes being large but poorly defined stratigraphically. The different styles of construction found within the ramparts need not necessarily be the result of multi-phase development, as Challis and Harding suggest (1975: 32): they could be the work of a number of teams building at one time, or could reflect the need for different rampart designs according to the natural slope of the hill (Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 17). The later date for the occupation sequence given by a ribbed bronze axe (Challis and Harding, 1975: 32) can be regarded, together with the barrows within the area enclosed by the defences, as evidence simply of the repeated use of the hill rather than the long occupation of the excavated hut platforms. In short, whilst aspects of the variation in the ceramic assemblage can be correlated with both the short and the long chronologies proposed for the site, the balance of probability favours the former rather than the latter. Certainly to assign the remarkable variety of fabric types to chronological factors begs the question of why different fabrics were used at different times or at the same time. The tentative conclusion from this study is that social factors, related particularly to the organisation of production, are likely to have been involved in part at least in the variability we can observe in the Mam Tor pottery.

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