

BACK TOR: A BRONZE AGE SITE IN EDALE, DERBYSHIRE

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THE SITE (Fig. 1)

Back Tor lies in the middle of a long ridge running from Mam Tor in the west to Lose Hill on the east, separating the Hope valley from the vale of Edale. The geological formation belongs to the Shale Grit series and is composed of a series of horizontal bands of sandstone and shale. At Back Tor there has been considerable landslip on the northern face, similar to that at Mam Tor, though much smaller. The tor itself rises from the ridge to form a substantial prominent feature, on the north-western side of which may lie the site of a much eroded burial mound.

The constant erosion of the tor itself has exposed a number of faces which, in the period 1981-91, yielded sufficient pottery, flints and other artefacts to suggest that the tor attracted activity during the Bronze Age. In addition, a considerable amount of ash, charcoal and burnt stones has accumulated over the natural sandstone on a wide area around it. These discoveries suggest a number of possible uses for the site, including a barrow, an open cemetery, domestic activity, or a combination of these. As yet, however, there are no burnt bone fragments indicative of cremation. The suspected barrow site lies directly on the highest part of the tor, but the pottery and other artefacts have been found spread over a much wider area.

The exact find spot of the 'Black Tor' pot (SHEFM Z24.1: Lewis, 1964; Challis and Harding, 1975: 37, fig. 3: 15; Coombs and Thompson, 1979: 46) is unknown except that it came from one of the eroded areas on the tor itself. The artefacts collected by the author over the last ten years suggest that the site may still contain valuable deposits. As the site is suffering from considerable weathering and wear through the action of walkers, it would seem advisable to excavate or protect it.

THE FINDS

All the archaeological material from the site is now housed at Sheffield City Museum.

The pottery (Fig. 2:1-2)

The 'Back Tor Pot' (2:1) has been already described in a number of articles. Although this type of pottery is not normally associated with burials, the distribution of artefacts and pottery could indicate that there could be secondary deposits on this site. It is a stumpy jar, thick-walled with an 'S' profile, coarse fabric with grit inclusions and a square rim profile. The newly found rimsherds (2:2) are from a much finer but slightly larger pot, again with an 'S' profile but with a rounded rim. There are at least two, possibly three, holes punched or drilled through the shoulder in close proximity below the rim. The fabric is coarse and slightly vesicular, but has been smoothed on the outer surface. There appears to be a slight, very broad, vertical ribbing below the rim, as on the Black Tor pot.

The pottery appears to be similar to some of that from Mam Tor for which a date of c. 1000-800 BC has been suggested. Challis and Harding (1975: 37) also agree that the pottery from Back Tor and Mam Tor belongs to the late Bronze Age. Other fragmentary sherds have been found on or near the eroded areas but unfortunately they are too small and undiagnostic for dating

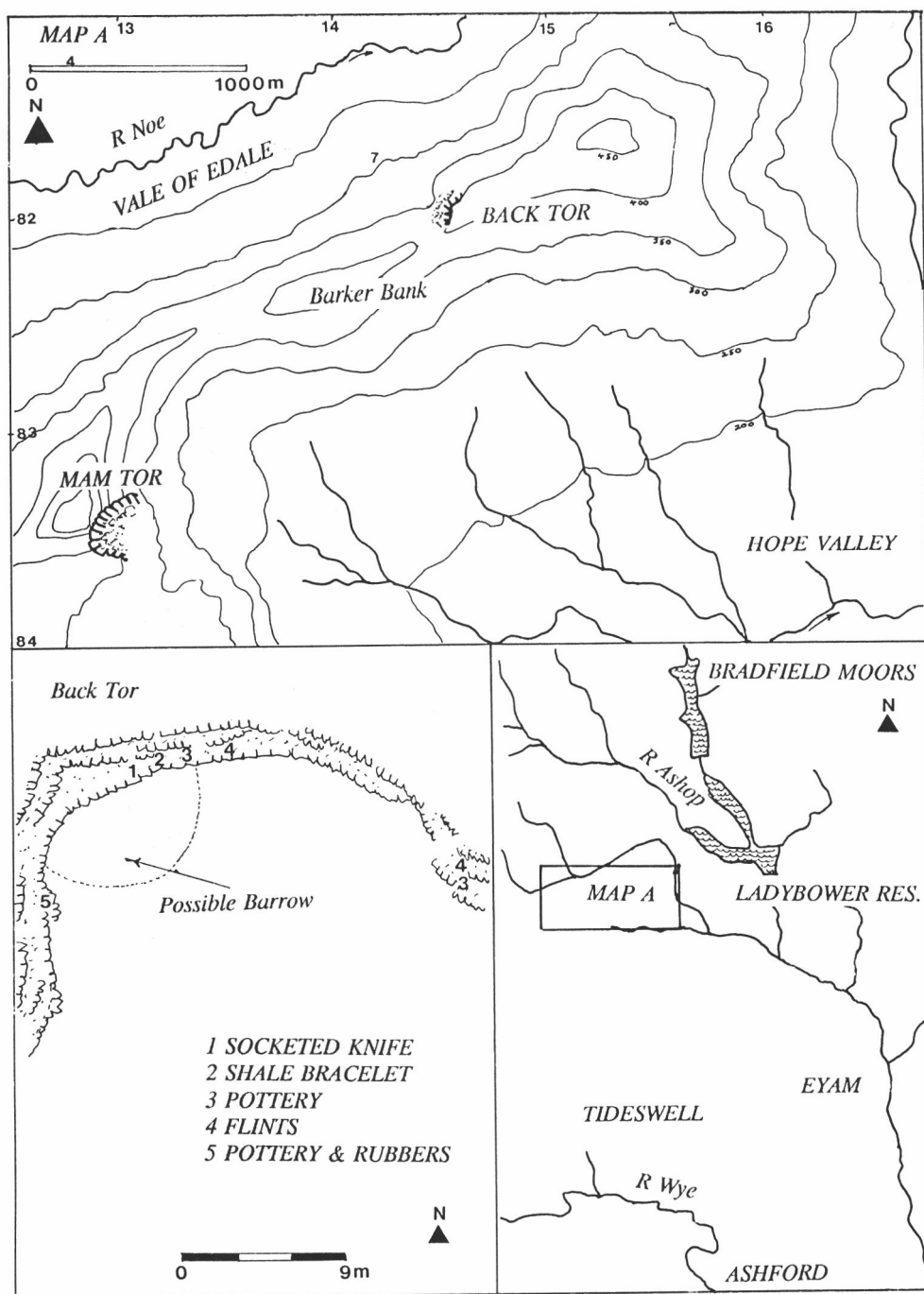


Fig. 1 Back Tor: locations.

purposes. One small sherd has a hard smooth, slightly burnished surface, in a brown coarse fabric.

Shale bracelet (Fig. 2:3)

A fragment of a shale bracelet (SHEFM 1986.56) was found on the northern face of the tor. It is 50 mm in length, with an overall diameter of 9 cms and triangular in section. Similar shale bracelets were found with the material from Mam Tor, suggesting a late-Bronze Age/early-Iron Age date (Coombs and Thompson, 1979). The Mam Tor bracelets are similar to other fragments found by the author on the eroded path between the summit of Mam Tor and the eastern entrance to the hillfort. In Derbyshire, there was some shale bracelet manufacturing at Swine Sty from the early Bronze Age (Beswick, 1975). This chronological range demonstrates the longevity of shale bracelet manufacture and usage, and shows that the Back Tor fragment could have been manufactured at any time from the early Bronze Age to the early Iron Age. However, the pottery and other artefacts from the site suggest a later rather than an earlier date.

Bronze socketed knife (Fig. 2:4)

This was found on the northern face in an eroded section, near to the shale bracelet. The knife consists of only a fragmentary portion of the blade and most of the socket. The socketed section has a single rivet or peg hole in either side to secure the handle. The present length of the blade is only 14 mm long and 2 mm thick. There is what could be a median ridge running down the blade centre to strengthen it (SHEFM 1986.192).

Similar socketed knives have been found. The one that appears to have the closest parallels to the Back Tor knife was found at Ketton, Rutland (Burgess and Coombs, 1979). This has been dated to 900-800 BC, and belongs to the Carps Tongue Ewart Park phase. The Back Tor knife probably had two pairs of rivet holes and may be of the Thorndon type.

Flints (Fig. 2:5-11)

The flints are mainly blades and waste fragments. Only two blades appear to have had secondary working on the edges; and an end scraper (2:7) was found on the north-eastern side of the tor. The one worked fragment of stone (2:5) is a fine white schist which has been trimmed along one edge. The lithic material could range from the Neolithic through to the Bronze Age.

Chert rubbers/mullers

Two rubbers or mullers were found associated with the second pot on the west side of the tor. The rubbers are both chert nodules and are pitted due to acid attack on the coral stems from which they are composed. The rubbers have a number of flat faces with rounded edges, and a number of fractured faces from pounding or grinding. A number of such rubbers have been found in barrows in Derbyshire; many are sandstone but some are chert. A similar rubber to those from Back Tor was found by Bateman in a barrow near Arbor Low (Howarth, 1899). Both are approximately the same size, i.e. 7 cms in diameter.

Lead ore

Two pieces of lead ore or galena have been found on the tor suggesting that a smelting hearth or bole exists nearby (SHEFFM 1986.237).

DISCUSSION

There seems to have been activity on the hilltop from at least the early Bronze Age through to the early Iron Age, or perhaps earlier if some of the lithic material is Neolithic. The situation of the tor on the ridge would have created a natural vantage point, and a link with the Mam Tor

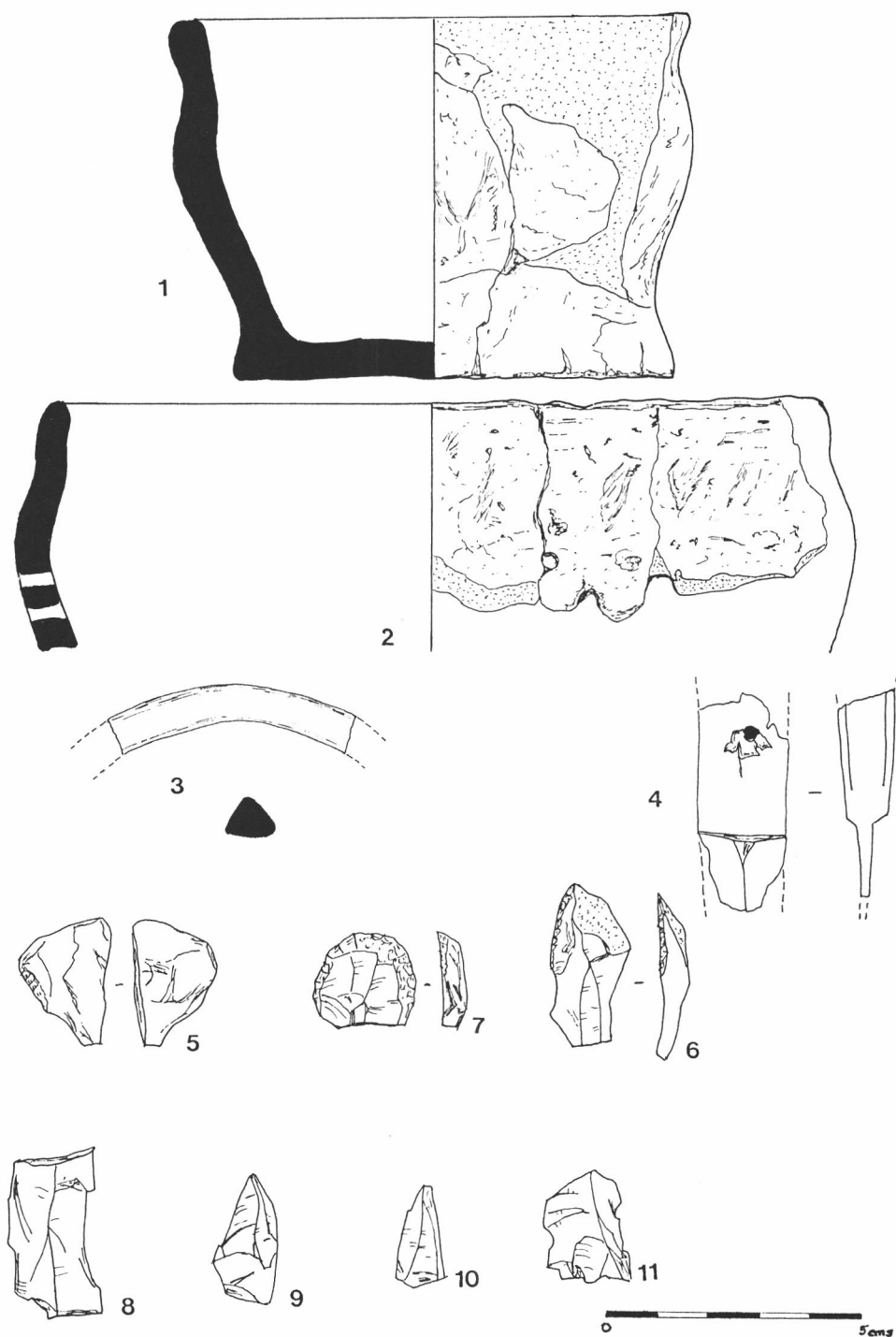


Fig. 2 Back Tor: Back Tor pot [1]; rim-sherds [2]; shale bracelet [3]; socketed knife[4]; flints [5-11].

hillfort. The closeness of both sites, the ridge way, and similarities in datable artefacts, support the idea of a connection between the two. Back Tor is suffering from extensive erosion and merits immediate archaeological attention.

APPENDIX: BARKER BANK (Fig. 1)

The author has found a number of flints and two flint scrapers on the ridge at Barker Bank, above Hollins Cross. These were found on the eroded pathway halfway up the hillside near a natural terrace. Slightly higher than the flint site there are the remains of a lead bole with ash and lead waste (SK137846).

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