

Neolithic ceramic sequence in the Milfield Basin: holy grails and missing points. Some comments on Millson *et al.* 2011

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SUMMARY

The evaluation of non-funerary pottery by Millson et al. is welcomed, but the identification of a so-called 'Neolithic-derived' class of pottery is rejected in favour of seeing this material as Food Vessel domestic pottery. The idea of a reinvention of the tradition of Middle Neolithic ceramics is explored.

PREAMBLE

NORTHUMBERLAND AND THE SCOTTISH BORDERS is a fascinating region for the study of Neolithic and Bronze Age ceramics. Taken with Yorkshire and Derbyshire, northern England and southern Scotland have together produced the complete suite of known ceramics from the fourth to the second millennia BC. The Beaker presence is strong here, the generally southerly distributed Collared Urns also feature greatly and the area very much constitutes the heartland for Food Vessels in all their guises (vases, bowls, urns). The Milfield Basin in particular has seen considerable high quality research over the last half century and especially in recent years (summarised in Passmore and Waddington, 2009; Waddington 2011) and it is proper and timely that the Neolithic and Bronze Age ceramic sequence(s) be re-examined. The synthetic article of Millson *et al.* (2011) is therefore welcomed as an up to date and well considered overview not just of the current chronological status but in bringing together both old and recently discovered assemblages. It is also mindful of the problems of identification, especially in sherd assemblages.

Undertaking commercial work in Northumberland over 10 years ago, the present writer was able to criticise some of the existing misidentifications of Northumbrian ceramics based on the circular arguments of some previous authorities when searching for ceramic parallels, and on some suspect and misquoted radiocarbon dates (Gibson 2002a). The findings and challenges written in that paper have fuelled the current article under review and it is reassuring (and indeed flattering) to the present writer that Millson *et al.* have largely upheld his decade-old hypothesis in this much changing archaeological environment. This criticism of Millson *et al.* therefore does not target the meat of the article but rather the detail. It is intended to address some factual errors and to question some interpretations. Foremost, it is intended to be constructive, to float some alternative hypotheses and, indeed, to open a debate.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BRONZE AGE CERAMICS

Almost a century ago, Reginald Smith, in his definition of (the then) Late Neolithic Peterborough Ware, suggested that this heavy-rimmed and profusely decorated ceramic may be the precursor to Food Vessels of the Early Bronze Age (Smith 1910). Twenty years later,

Piggott re-examined Peterborough Ware and suggested a stylistic development based largely on rim form — from simple everted rims to thickened, 'T'-sectioned and ultimately collared — (Piggott 1931, fig. 13), though Piggott did not 'presuppose a chronological sequence' on this typology. Piggott also envisaged Peterborough Ware overlapping with Beaker, not least at West Kennet where Thurnham found both Beaker and Peterborough Ware in association. In her oft-cited but unpublished PhD thesis of 1956, Isobel Smith saw the heavy and squarish rims and the hollow neck of the Mortlake style directly influencing Food Vessels whilst the heavy collared rim of the Fengate style, often with filled triangle decoration, directly gave rise to Collared Urns (Smith 1956).

The idea of this logical stylistic development persisted in the archaeological literature, fuelled by Piggott and Atkinson's excavations at West Kennet where the Peterborough Ware and Beaker association (now with Grooved Ware) was confirmed in the blocking material (Piggott 1962). Grooved Ware and Peterborough Ware were therefore established as *Late* Neolithic ceramics leading to, and overlapping with, Beakers, and that Food Vessels and Urns emerged from this ceramic melting pot.

This view persisted throughout the next three decades (Smith 1974, 112; Burgess 1974, 182). Kinnes thought that 'a strong stylistic contribution from Late Neolithic ceramics to those of Collared Urn and Food Vessel style [indicated] some component of population continuity' (1979, 73), and in 1984 Longworth claimed that the main formative influences of Collared Urns lay in the later stages of the Peterborough tradition (Longworth, 1984, 19). This progression was neat, convenient and worked in the days of a short Neolithic chronology which was largely unsupported by the then expensive and relatively little used radiocarbon dating and which was compounded by the generally poor selection of samples by archaeologists understandably in awe of the technique. Even when accurate radiocarbon dating was employed, the lack of an accepted calibration curve still resulted in the concept of a short chronology.

In 1996 a radiocarbon date of *c.* 3500 cal BC was obtained at the British Museum from a Peterborough Ware vessel in the base of a ring ditch at Horton in the Thames valley. The date was immediately dismissed as laboratory error and a second was run which proved a match. Such was the scepticism of the present writer and Ian Kinnes that five dates were eventually obtained from material associated with this vessel all of which were generally consistent. This prompted a review of radiocarbon dates that were associated with Peterborough Ware (Gibson and Kinnes 1997) which demonstrated that rather than the perceived Ebbsfleet-Mortlake-Fengate progression within the Peterborough tradition, all three styles were in contemporary existence in the middle of the fourth millennium BC. That article has been criticised by Millson *et al.* for failing 'to fully appreciate the taphonomic relationship between the dated material and the "associated" ceramic assemblage' (Millson *et al.* 2011, 5). This, however, is missing the point of the article. True, the end of Peterborough usage was more difficult to date than the beginnings, probably due to ill-selected samples, but the value of the article, based on a critical re-evaluation of the data, was to point out the early origins of the tradition and the likely lack of any internal chronologically valid subdivision. Radiocarbon dates obtained subsequently from well-selected Peterborough Ware-associated contexts have supported the fourth millennium date for the tradition as first claimed in the 1997 article. If anything, these post-1997 dates have pushed back the end of the tradition possibly as far as the first century of the third millennium BC. The second point of the article (and hence the awful pun in the title) was to highlight the gap between Impressed Ware and the Early Bronze

Age forms that it was supposed to beget in the Beaker period melting pot. Gibson and Kinnes's third point was to draw attention to the discrepancy in date between late Neolithic Grooved Ware and Peterborough Ware to the extent that the latter could now be used to define a Middle Neolithic period, an hypothesis that has subsequently been supported by more recent Middle Neolithic dates for a series of burials and artefacts (*inter alia*, Gibson and Bayliss 2010) previously presumed to be Later Neolithic in date: the article effectively introduced the concept of a discrete Middle Neolithic. With the increase in the radiocarbon database since 1997 and a further refinement of the dates, there would now appear to have been a gap of as much as some 800 years between the demise of Impressed Ware and the emergence of the Early Bronze Age vessels that were assumed to emerge from the Neolithic tradition. (Note: the present writer prefers the name Impressed Ware for this Middle Neolithic ceramic tradition, with Peterborough Ware now relegated to the position of a southern British variant. Impressed Ware acknowledges the main decorative technique and acts as an umbrella term for the related but stylistically distinct material in northern Britain and Ireland.)

Despite its closer chronological relationship, influence of Late Neolithic Grooved Ware on Beaker and Bronze Age pottery was more difficult to find. Case (2001, 369) has claimed that grooving, internal decoration, contrasting motifs and ribs on some Necked Beakers is probably Grooved-Ware derived but the present writer does not find this convincing. Ribs, such as those found on the Beaker from Kellythorpe, Yorkshire (Clarke 1970, no. 1265), are indeed rare, but ribs or cordons often appear below the rim on AOC Beakers and in domestic contexts on both sides of the North Sea. Other than rusticated vessels, Clarke illustrates 13 late Beakers with two or more raised cordons in the neck. Other than three vessels (Sidmouth, Devon, no. 159.1; Fengate, Northamptonshire, no. 644; Thorpe Hall, Essex, no. 265) all are from Northern Britain (Yorkshire – 6, Northumberland – 1, Aberdeenshire – 1, East Lothian – 1). If the use of cordons had been influenced by Grooved Ware one might expect to see additional examples in other Grooved Ware strongholds such as Wessex. In fact, cordons occur most frequently on larger rusticated vessels related to the *Potbeker* phenomenon of the Netherlands (Gibson and Snape forthcoming) and their occurrence on comb-decorated vessels may represent simply an element of borrowing from the domestic repertoire.

The use of grooving and of large geometric motifs may be seen more as an expansion and, to an extent, a deterioration of the Beaker decorative formula as it emerges from the formal constraints of the early vessels. This expansion of motif, technique and formal variation is seen across large parts of the European Beaker network where Grooved Ware influence cannot be contemplated (Nicolis 2001). Plastic decoration, one of the most common Grooved Ware techniques, is, however, found on some Food Vessels and Food Vessel Urns (Encrusted Urns) and, in a less convincing way, Cordoned Urns. Deverel-Rimbury and Wessex Handled Urns may also owe a little of their form to Grooved Ware, but once again this is unconvincing — given the chronological gap between the two traditions — and the plastic element on the Bronze Age vessels may be purely functional, given the size of the pots.

Beaker influence on Food Vessels and Collared Urns is much easier to detect. The use of geometrically arranged decoration and filled triangles and, of course, the use of a toothed comb, a decorative technique which was commonly used on Beaker and post-Beaker ceramics but which is rarely encountered in pre-Beaker contexts.

It is therefore with Impressed Ware that Early Bronze Age pots have most affinity in terms of shape and in the majority of their decorative techniques (twisted and whipped cord, bird-

bone and fingernail impressions and the use of the herringbone motif), but with Impressed Ware now dating to the latter half of the fourth millennium and start of the third millennium and Food Vessels and Urns not appearing in graves until the very late third and early second millennium, the influence of the one on the other seems less plausible, especially given the ostensible gap of as much as a millennium between the demise of the former and the advent of the latter (Gibson and Kinnes 1997). With the facility to date cremated bone and therefore the increased ability to obtain direct dates for the burials associated with Food Vessels and Urns (Sheridan 2003; 2004; 2007) there was the potential to extend the period(s) of currency of these vessels; however, this proved not to be the case and the increasing body of dates now available has proved convincingly that our Early Bronze Age sepulchral pottery does indeed date to the Early Bronze Age. The millennium divide between Impressed Wares on the one hand and Food Vessels and Urns on the other persists.

'MISSING LINKS'

The legacy of West Kennet also persists. The blocking of the tomb suggests a period when Peterborough Ware, Grooved Ware and Beaker were in contemporary use. Now that we have increasing evidence for the curation of both artefacts and skeletal remains in the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age, this can now be questioned. Increasing evidence for the use of midden material to seal and close sites — for example the Beaker structures at Cavenham, Suffolk (Gibson and Gill forthcoming), or the penannular ditched enclosure at Ringlemere, Kent (Parfitt and Needham 2007) — also points to the curation of artefactual and ecofactual material, perhaps loaded with memory, history and symbolism, and its deposition in later but significant contexts. It might be expected therefore, that links between Neolithic and Bronze Age ceramics might be located in the domestic sphere as originally suggested by Burgess and Shennan (1976).

If such exist, they prove difficult to identify. A study by the present writer highlighted the fragmentary nature of the ceramics, the paucity of reconstructable forms and the lack of strict association in many of the domestic assemblages (Gibson 1982). Furthermore, our corpus of stratified and securely dated domestic sites of the period is small and Food Vessel and Urns rarely form part of the suite of ceramics found in pit deposits. Those domestic sites that have been recently excavated and dated suggest a certain integrity to their ceramic repertoire such as, for example, the Grooved Ware settlements at Trelystan, Powys, or Barnhouse, Orkney (Britnell 1982; Richards 2005), the Beaker settlement at Northton, Harris (Simpson *et al.* 2006), and the Food Vessel settlement at Ardnave, Islay (Ritchie and Welfare 1983). Beaker domestic sites are usually late in the Beaker sequence and those that have produced pottery with Impressed Ware or Early Bronze Age affinities unfortunately lack precise stratigraphy so that association, *sensu stricto*, is impossible to prove (Gibson 1982).

Domestic pottery is admittedly a significant gap in our knowledge. We know what was accompanying the dead but not what they had been using before their demise. Undecorated or sparsely decorated and rusticated material is found on the few domestic sites of the period, but more important might be the ceramic integrity of the material (Grooved Ware fabric, forms and decoration at Grooved Ware sites, Beaker fabrics, forms and decoration at Beaker sites, and so on into the Bronze Age). Adhering and absorbed residues on some sepulchral vessels, as well as their often incomplete state, also suggest that they have had a use, probably domestic, prior to their deposition in graves.

'NEOLITHIC-DERIVATIVE OR DOMESTIC BEAKER MATERIAL'

Against this background, the present writer's attention was turned to the 'Neolithic-derivative' material as identified by Millson *et al.* (2011, 19). This section claims to identify pottery that is 'as yet unclassified and in some cases nondescript [and which] frequently displays decorative motifs and techniques derived from the insular Neolithic ceramic styles of Impressed Ware, and more prominently Grooved Ware, and on occasions Beaker (Millson *et al.* 2011, 19). It is claimed that this pottery has often been 'miscategorised' and that both the decoration and the pots can be more crudely made. They also state that 'many ceramics other than Beakers were used during the Beaker period' (their p. 20).

Examples of this material comprise the Beaker/Food Vessel hybrid from Milfield North (their fig. 13) and the Bowl Food Vessel from pit C at the same site (fig. 14). The Beaker/Food Vessel hybrid is identified as such largely because of its 'slight rib or carination'; however, if the central non-contiguous sherd in the reconstruction is turned upside down, then we have a more acceptable rusticated Beaker profile, albeit from a not terribly well-made or elegant vessel. It should be remembered, of course, that not all Beakers can be regarded as fine wares and that some late vessels in particular can show an extremely poor level of decoration and manufacture (Gibson 2002b, colour plate 14). Millson *et al.*'s fig. 14 is described as being of Food Vessel form (which it is) but having Beaker-derived decoration in the form of pendant filled triangles on the body (which it does) — but whilst the motif may be Beaker, the technique (whipped cord) is not. 'Re-calibration' (*sic*) of the radiocarbon date, it is claimed, places this Food Vessel in the Beaker period, but at 2470–1940 cal BC (95% confidence), this is also well within the Food Vessel date range (2200–1600; Sheridan 2004), albeit towards the earlier part of the range. Given that the date (HAR-1199) is from unidentified charcoal associated with the cremation, the old wood effect must also be borne in mind — exactly one of the criticisms made of Gibson and Kinnes (1997) and discussed above. If the date is therefore regarded as a *terminus post quem*, as indeed it must be, then the date fits perfectly well within the Food Vessel range.

The incised and impressed material from Milfield North Pit alignment Pit 2 (Millson *et al.* fig. 15) drew parallel with Grooved Ware at the time of the original excavation report (Harding 1981). However, the 'coarse and heavy' nature of the pottery suggested that the parallel was a loose one. The combination of dot impressions and incision (p7 and p8 on their fig. 15) can be paralleled on a Food Vessel Vase from Birtley (Durham), and on Bowls from Ford and from Beanley West Farm, Northumberland (Gibson 1978, nos. 5, 73 and 74), and on a Food Vessel Urn from Ryton (Gibson 1978, 108). The two-directional incision can also be paralleled on (*inter alia*) the vessel from Birtley mentioned above, a late Beaker from Lilburn Hill (Tait 1965, 44, no. 48) and bipartite Vases from Bewes Hill (Durham), Amble Quarry, Ashington, and Seahouses (Gibson 1978, nos. 5, 9, 15, 25 and 26). The irregular stabs on p11 (Millson *et al.* 2011, fig. 15) can also be found on bipartite Vases from Doddington, Chatton, Cornhill, and Ashington (Gibson 1978, 10, 16, 30 and 31). This (admittedly small) sherd evidence, can, therefore, be well matched in Food Vessels and may rest more happily in this corpus than it does with Grooved Ware. Once again it is stated (Millson *et al.* 2011, 22) that 're-calibration (*sic*) of Harding's radiocarbon determinations ... places these sherds within a Beaker range' (22), but the dates (BM-1650, 1652, 1653) fit the ranges for both Beakers and Food Vessels, collectively spanning the period 2350–1740 cal BC (95%). However, and as indicated in their Table 5 (but not in the main text), these dates (again) were obtained from

unidentified charcoal which may already have been old when deposited and must at best be *termini post quem*. Furthermore, these dates were undertaken by the British Museum at a time when, due to laboratory error, many of the resultant dates can be discounted. Indeed all such BM dates should be discounted (unless the sample was re-run) and, if the date ranges appear acceptable (as with the dates under discussion) this may well be purely fortuitous (Ian Kinnes, pers. comm.).

The same problem befalls the dates for the Barrel Urn with applied lugs from Whitton Hill (their fig. 17). This was initially identified as Grooved Ware but was subsequently considered to be Bronze Age (Gibson 2002a, 177). Millson *et al.* (2011, 22) cite the radiocarbon dates for this vessel as falling between 2300–1980 cal BC, and therefore within the Beaker date range. However, as was pointed out by the present writer in 2002, the dates (BM-2265 and 2206) were also undertaken during the period of laboratory error at the British Museum; they were re-run (BM2265R and 2206R) but produced such wide margins of error that in rounded terms, they span the period 3400–1500 cal BC. Given that they are also from unidentified charcoal these dates should be discounted.

The Whitton Park material (Millson *et al.* 2011 fig. 18, p8) is also coarse and may well be Bronze Age in date. Admittedly the sparse fingernail impressions and, to an extent, the curvature of the sherd, do not find immediate parallels in the local Food Vessel assemblage, but such fingernail-decorated vessels are common in Late Beaker assemblages (Gibson 1982), albeit in a different fabric, so this decorative technique is neither unexpected nor out of place in an ostensibly Bronze Age domestic assemblage. The friability and uneven curvature of the sherd from Whitton Park may be more due to taphonomic processes than to the fabric recipe: largely complete pots placed in graves survive somewhat better than sherd material in unprotected pits. The radiocarbon date for the Whitton Park material (2140–1880 cal BC, at 95%) again dates to both the late Beaker period and the Earlier Bronze Age.

The use of plaited cord on the wall sherd from Whitton Park (Millson *et al.* 2011, fig. 19) is described as ‘often seen on Beakers’ but, in fact, plaited cord is rare on Beakers. Plaited cord can be found on the inside of a rim sherd of a presumed AOC Beaker from Ross Links (Tait 1965, 36, no. 15), but nowhere else in Northumberland. It is occasionally found on AOC Beakers elsewhere and its occurrence in the graves of the ‘Amesbury Archer’ and ‘Boscombe Bowmen’ suggests that it is present from an early stage in the chronology of Beakers (Fitzpatrick 2011). Plaited-cord decoration is much more commonly found on Food Vessel, Urn and related pottery, both nationally (*e.g.* Trevisker Ware) and locally. For example, plaited cord decorates the late Collared Urn from Stonebridge (Durham) and a Food Vessel Urn from High Buston (Gibson 1978, nos. 140 and 106).

The fabric descriptions for this ‘Neolithic-derivative pottery’ (Millson *et al.* 2011, 25) stress the differences between this material and the fabrics of Carinated Bowls, Impressed Ware and Grooved Ware (their fig. 4); however, the same fabric mixes are found in Food Vessels and Urns (though admittedly the present writer has not been as rigorous in his fabric analysis as have Millson *et al.*). It is unfortunate that Food Vessels (and, for that matter, Beakers) were not included for comparative purposes in the detailed fabric analysis (their p. 10 and fig. 4). It is also stated elsewhere (their p. 26) that Beakers ‘are thin walled and fine tempered’, but this is only as true as a generalisation can be. It is certainly the case for typologically early Beakers (see Ross Links, in Tait 1965) but in later vessels fabric thickness and fineness can be extremely variable, as a glance through Tait’s corpus will show. Vessel thickness of Neolithic-derivative material tends to exceed that of Beakers, but so too do the fabrics of Food Vessels and Urns.

The formal traits described on their p. 25 also fit well the Food Vessel and Urn range: flat bases and flaring walls, flat and simple rims, inturned rims. These are described as 'anticipating' Food Vessels but there is nothing about these forms that could not fit within a Food Vessel assemblage and the dates cited do not necessarily pre-date the Food vessel period of currency. The present writer does agree, however, that these inturned rims may be Grooved Ware derived. The decoration on 'Neolithic-derivative' pottery can be well or poorly executed, and includes whipped and twisted cord, stabs, stamps, fingernail impressions, grooves and cordons. Some body sherds are undecorated. Once again all of these traits sit happily in the Food Vessel repertoire (see Gibson 1978 for Northumberland and Durham).

DISCUSSION

Millson *et al.*'s discussion and treatment of the Neolithic ceramics of the Milfield Basin and Northumberland with the associated modelled radiocarbon dates is useful and uncontentious. The chronology of the styles fits the national pattern and the stylistic progression is clear. The contentious issue in the paper is the identification of 'Neolithic-derived' material. The name itself is unsatisfactory as it has been recognised for over a century that Bronze Age Food Vessels and Collared Urns are 'derived' from Neolithic traditions (though the process of that derivation is more difficult to understand). Millson *et al.* themselves wrestle with the terminology (their p. 19) and admit that it is unsatisfactory but the problem is of their own making. They have been trying to identify 'missing links' between Neolithic and Bronze Age ceramics set against the 800 year gap between the demise of Impressed Ware and the rise of Food Vessels. In this, I feel, they have failed.

Their argument relies largely on sherd evidence, and selective treatment of the decorative elements on such sherds, but there is an apparent unfamiliarity with the Bronze Age corpus a reliance on unreliable and/or radiocarbon dates that are *termini post quem* (as discussed above), and a perceived lack of understanding of Beaker, Food Vessel and Urn chronology.

In his 2005 review of Beakers in Britain, Needham identified a clear horizon *c.* 2200 BC after which the character of Beakers and of Beaker burials changed. Needham referred to this as the Fission Horizon which coincided not just with the diversification of the Beaker pot, but also with the demise of Grooved Ware and the emergence of Food Vessels. Slightly later, *c.* 2100 BC, Collared Urns also appeared. According to Needham's scheme, the 'Beaker period' therefore lasts from the arrival of Beakers *c.* 2450 BC until their demise around 1750 BC. During this time, they were contemporary with late Grooved Ware (until *c.* 2150 BC) and with Early Bronze Age ceramics (from after 2200 BC). This has been supported and refined by recent radiocarbon dates obtained for the Beaker People Project (Parker Pearson *et al.* forthcoming) which also suggests that Beakers probably arrived a little later in Scotland, and that their appearance in graves may have stopped rather sooner. Such may also be the case for Yorkshire.

It is of little surprise, therefore, that some of the material identified as 'Neolithic-derived' has 'Beaker-period' dates, given the overlaps mentioned above: Beakers, Food Vessels and Urns do not have chronologically discrete distributions, either nationally or specifically in Northumberland. This is clearly seen in the C₁₄ date distribution diagrams (Millson *et al.* 2011, figs. 1–3) — but note that the short 'Beaker Period' is defined by dates from only five sites. Millson *et al.* could easily have said that this pottery fitted into the 'Food Vessel period' as the dates that they quote are equally applicable. Furthermore, some of the dates that they

quote are probably derived from old wood and/or are subject to laboratory error, as discussed above, and should therefore be discounted in any chronological synthesis. This reduces the meagre number of dates still further. The date from Whitton Park, on a short-lived sample of hazel shell, is one of the few acceptable dates for this material, and at 2140–1880 cal BC (95%) is clearly Early Bronze Age (post-Fission Horizon). In the present writer's opinion, based on the illustrations of relevant sherds and the description of fabrics and forms for 'Neolithic-derived' ceramics, all easily fit the range encountered in Food Vessels and Urns. The term should therefore be abandoned as the class of pottery does not exist.

Commendable in the article under discussion is the evaluation of underlying 'domestic' or non-funerary pottery and this is probably the article's main strength. Grooved Ware influence is predominant amongst this material but this is perhaps to be expected as Grooved Ware declines after the appearance of Beakers and as Bronze Age ceramics develop. Grooved Ware was the only indigenous ceramic style in use at the time of the Beaker arrival. More perplexing in Millson *et al.* is the 'resemblance to Impressed Ware' noticed in the 'Neolithic-derived' ceramics (their p. 27) as Impressed Ware had been out of use for almost a millennium. Given the reliable dates cited, the 'insular continuation of ceramic development amid the arrival of Beakers' that 'Neolithic-derived' pottery is seen to represent (their p. 27), is relevant only to Grooved Ware. On current radiocarbon evidence, no such continuation in development can be traced in the Impressed Ware tradition. Instead there would appear to have been a re-introduction of the tradition after a long period of abandonment in the form of Food Vessels and Urns (not just formal similarities, but impressed decoration, internal and rim bevel and moulding decoration, extensive use of herring bone motifs, etc.), albeit with Beaker and (to a lesser extent) Grooved ware influence. The reasons for and mechanisms of this re-introduction of tradition are not fully understood but some possible hypotheses can be suggested.

With Needham's Fission Horizon comes not just a diversification of Beaker forms and new sepulchral ceramics, but also a greater range in grave furniture. These artefactual associations include not just prestige package items found with pre-Fission-Horizon Beakers but a range of more mundane, utilitarian artefacts such as flint flakes and knives. Jet and other items of jewellery appear, as do symbols of authority such as maceheads and battle axes. This range of artefacts, far less restricted than the pre-Fission-Horizon Beaker package, bears a strong resemblance to the middle Neolithic sepulchral artefact repertoire of prestige goods such as Seamer axes and adzes, antler maceheads, and exotic lozenge arrowheads, down to mundane strike-a-lights, scrapers, stone rubbers and flint knives (Gibson, *in* Parker Pearson *et al.* forthcoming). Jet, known in the Middle Neolithic burial record in the form of belt sliders, is almost unknown in later Neolithic contexts, but appears again in post-Fission-Horizon graves in the form of beads, buttons and spacer plates. Direct artefact parallels between the Middle Neolithic and post 2200 BC are not the point, it is the range and the re-emergences that are important.

This is also the case with the treatment of human remains. Middle Neolithic burials exhibit a range of forms: crouched inhumations, disarticulated and/or partial inhumations, and cremations, both discrete and partial. Multiple deposits and single individuals are present. Burials may or may not be accompanied by grave goods, they may appear in cists or in pits, on the ground surface, or above it in mound material. Early third-millennium burials, except those in Passage Graves, are rare. Cremations seem to predominate and the few inhumations that have been recognised tend to be those of children. The distinctive Beaker burial of crouched inhumation with a restricted artefact package beneath round mounds appears

c. 2450 cal BC but by 2200 cal BC the diversity of burial remains has once again reverted to that range of burial modes found in the Middle (not Late) Neolithic, including deep shaft graves beneath some Yorkshire round barrows (Petersen 1972; Gibson 2007; Gibson in Parker Pearson forthcoming).

In field monuments, the tradition of circularity emerges quite suddenly in the Middle Neolithic with a range of penannular enclosures (aka class I henges) that continue well into the Bronze Age. Double-entranced and/or monumental enclosures coincide with the pre- and post-Fission-Horizon Beaker period (as defined above) but, again, the variety in circular monuments increases dramatically after the Fission Horizon.

Given the re-emergence of Middle Neolithic monumental and sepulchro-ritual practices after 2200 BC, it becomes easier to understand the re-emergence of Middle Neolithic ceramics albeit in a modified form with some to-be-expected Beaker influence. Middle Neolithic forms may have survived in shrines or chambered tombs. They may have survived in midden material accumulated over centuries. They may have survived in the oral record in which tales they gained mythical or mystical attributes. All are possible; all are equally subjective. But the pattern is clear. There is a Middle Neolithic revival after 2200, midway through the Beaker Period and this also relates to sepulchral pottery.

The reasons for this reinvention of tradition are more difficult to identify. It may have been a 'native' reaction to the introduction of Beakers but, if so, why did it take 200 years to manifest itself? Why was there no resurgence in Grooved Ware, still widely in use during the currency of early Beakers and the only 'native' ceramic in use at the time of the Beaker introduction? Reinventions of tradition often happen at a time of liberation after oppression. The Welsh gorseddau mark a renewed interest in Welsh culture after the suppression of the Welsh language in schools. In nineteenth-century Scotland there was Romantic enthusiasm for Scottish culture and the reinvention of tartans following the ban after the Jacobite Rebellion. In the Irish Republic there was renewed enthusiasm for Irish culture (music, literature and language) after independence was won. These are modern examples, and their relevance may rightly be questioned but the occurrence of such reinventions raises questions about Grooved Ware society. The reinvention of the Middle Neolithic coincides with the end of Grooved Ware rather than the appearance of Beakers.

As outlined above (and in Millson *et al.*), it was thought that continuity in ceramic development might be resolved in the domestic assemblages and Millson *et al.* are to be congratulated in examining the material from both new and well known domestic contexts in the Milfield Basin. By its nature it is often scrappy, and from isolated pits, making unequivocal identification difficult. But the few well excavated domestic sites that we have from the third and second millennia do tend to share a ceramic integrity with variation in vessel size and fabric quality but with little if any stylistic mixing. This can be summed up by Trevor Cowie's discussion of the Ardnave material (Ritchie and Welfare 1983, 328–31), and is equally pertinent to the Beaker domestic sites at Northton, Harris (Gibson, in Simpson *et al.* 2006), Cavenham, Suffolk (Gibson and Gill, forthcoming), and the Grooved Ware domestic material from Ringlemere, Kent (Gibson, in prep.). Cowie writes that the Ardnave domestic Food Vessel assemblage 'shows very clearly that communities of the period had — *as might be expected* — a range of vessel shapes and sizes at their disposal . . . The assemblage demonstrates the quite considerable variety of finished products that might be achieved by a single community working within the framework of a recognizably coherent formal tradition' (Cowie, in Ritchie and Welfare, 1983, 331, my emphasis).

With this in mind, and given the range of the few reliable dates, the present writer would have no hesitation in labelling 'Neolithic-derived' material 'Food Vessel domestic pottery'. This may be influenced by Grooved Ware continuity, Beaker introduction and Impressed Ware reinvention. The Holy Grail of missing links between Impressed Ware and Food Vessels and Urns may, therefore, be unattainable and may remain a fruitless quest. Food Vessels with secure Neolithic dates and Impressed Ware with secure Beaker or Bronze Age dates may never have existed. The phenomenon may involve re-emergence rather than continuity but the mechanics of and reasons for this reinvention of tradition must, for the present at least, remain obscure.

POSTSCRIPT

Although this paper disagrees in points of detail with Millson *et al.* it should be clear from the above that there is much that we do agree upon and the writer enthusiastically welcomes the important Neolithic and Bronze Age research — often with spectacular results — that is and has been taking place in the Milfield Basin and in Northumberland generally (Passmore and Waddington, 2009; Waddington 2011). The disagreement is largely about the continuity of Impressed Ware, and the matter of 'pegs and labels' with which we began. Disagreement is the stuff of archaeology and academic discourse, and interpretation reigns supreme in an environment where proofs are impossible. I hope Millson *et al.* will read this critique in the way that it is offered, as an alternative hypothesis presented in the interests of academic discourse. Both the views of Millson *et al.* and the present writer must remain hypothetical until considerably more, and more reliable, radiocarbon dates are obtained for ceramic assemblages, both funerary and domestic, that are broadly datable to this important period at the Neolithic/Bronze Age transition.

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