

When did pots become domestic? Special pots and everyday pots in British prehistory

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SUMMARY

This wide-ranging review considers the social roles of pottery vessels in prehistoric Britain from the beginning of the Neolithic through to the Middle Iron Age — a period of four millennia. The results of recent research, particularly that involving the consideration of vessel capacities and contextualisation, are woven together in order to substantiate a novel and provocative hypothesis, that prior to the Middle Iron Age, most pots were made and used for the consumption of food, drink and hallucinogenic substances in the context of communal gatherings and feasting. It was only from the Middle Iron Age onwards that larger assemblages of ceramics included a wide range of everyday cooking and eating vessels.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion begins with a picture (Fig. 1). This shows, on the left, an Early Neolithic ceramic drinking set from Jutland in Denmark, taken from a paper by my colleague Andrew Sherratt (1991). When he and I were young students at Cambridge we were fortunate to have been taught and nurtured by the late David Clarke, famous author of *Analytical Archaeology* published in 1968. During our studies of the Neolithic cultures of central and northern Europe, David often stressed the specific and functional aspects of many of the pottery forms and, in particular, the sets of curiously shaped vessels which had obviously been designed for the communal consumption of special foods and liquids. The set depicted in Fig. 1 is one of these, and Andrew Sherratt had argued that these Danish sets 'seem to represent a local adaptation of the south-east European drinking sets which can be related to the introduction of wine and other alcoholic substitutes' (Sherratt 1991, 56). However, wine was not known in the Neolithic period of Denmark, so what were they drinking? Sherratt suggests that a clue is provided by the very shape of the pottery flask which, when inverted, bears an uncanny resemblance to the head of a poppy (see Fig. 1, right). Are we dealing with opium in soluble form? 'Reading the record, even upside down, may sometimes reveal a hidden iconography' (*ibid.*, 56). Furthermore, cord-impressed decoration on prehistoric pottery may have been executed using hemp fibres, from the plant *Cannabis sativa*, and such pots may have been used

for drinking strange mixtures of alcohol and cannabis, which in prehistoric Europe was infused rather than smoked (*ibid.*, fig. 7). With the exception of the unique Neolithic vessel from Liff's Lowe, Derbyshire (Clarke *et al.* 1985, fig. 3.34), flasks of the type shown in Fig. 1 are not known from Britain. However, it can be argued that certain special ceramic types, and prescribed sets of vessels, were current in this country from the earliest Neolithic period.

NEOLITHIC

A ceramic pot is a container which separates outside from inside and usually is intended to contain a commodity. It is made from clay and inclusions — natural earth and rock — and is transformed by fire. It is also easy to decorate, so early on could be employed to carry symbols which might denote individual or group identity. In the book *The Emergence of Pottery* (Barnett and Hoopes 1995), it is suggested that Neolithic TRB pottery in Scandinavia was used especially for new foods — cereals, bread and beer — in contexts of significant 'partying' or competitive feasting. Everyday subsistence meanwhile depended more on animal husbandry and wild plant resources. Therefore pottery was being used to prepare special new foods in new ways and also to display both the food itself, and the social symbols depicted on the pots, at social gatherings and feasts. Pots were usually made to special secret recipes; the earliest pottery, in many

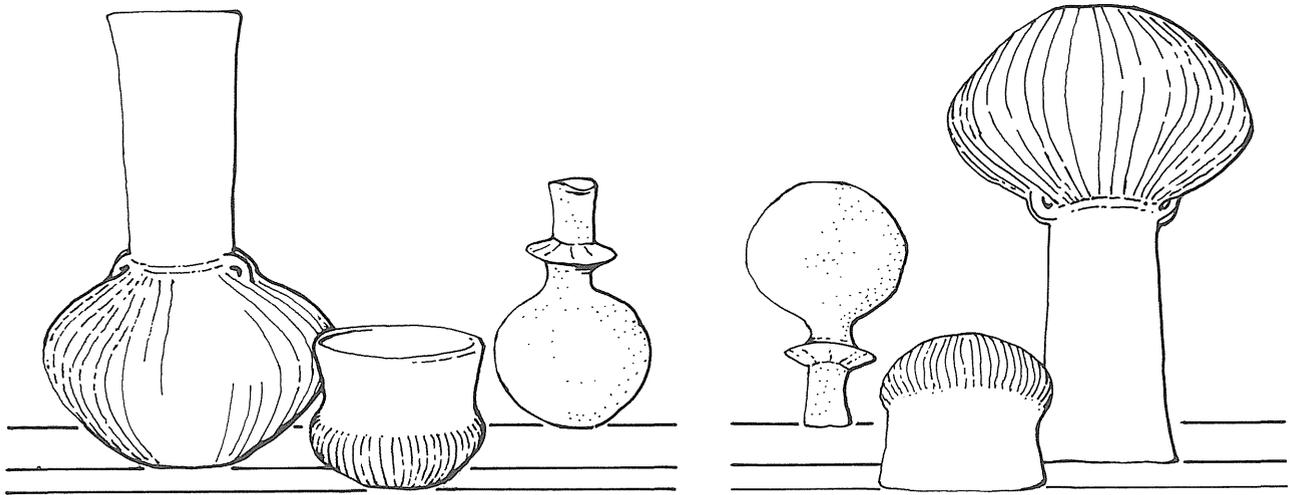


Fig. 1. Early Neolithic pottery assemblage from a grave under a long barrow at Tovstrup, Jutland, Denmark (height of largest vessel: c. 30 cm), with an inverted mirror image to the right (Peter Woodward; pottery assemblage based on Sherratt 1991, fig. 4).

different parts of the world, is not crude and roughly made but often highly burnished and finely constructed: for instance, in Britain, the fine carinated bowls of Grimston type (Herne 1988).

I am going to argue that the specialised use of vessels for the displaying and consumption of food at feasts, and for the symbolic representation and consolidation of social status at the individual or group level was commonplace. It was commonplace throughout the Neolithic and Bronze Age periods in Britain, and even up until the beginning of the Middle Iron Age. The argument is intended to be provocative.

Julian Thomas has shown, first in *Rethinking the Neolithic* (1991), and in other books and papers (for example, Thomas 1996), that much Neolithic pottery and other artefacts were deliberately deposited in various types of context. This applies especially to Middle and Late Neolithic pottery styles with their complex decoration. Peterborough Ware occurs particularly in structured pit deposits and Grooved Ware in larger assemblages, but especially at henge monuments. Thomas regards such pottery as special and its non-utilitarian usage in largely ritual contexts as both sporadic and specific. This pottery is totally *non-domestic*. Moving backwards in time to consider Early Neolithic pottery, however, we find that the larger assemblages, deriving mainly from causewayed enclosures, have been interpreted as domestic — an everyday selection of cups, eating and serving vessels, cooking pots and storage containers (see especially Howard 1981, fig. 1:4). At the same time, deposits in the ditch segments at causewayed enclosures have, since the time of Alexander Keiller, been regarded as the

result of feasting episodes. A smaller-scale picture emerges at Coneybury, near Stonehenge, where a deliberate deposit of pottery and animal bone in a large pit has been studied by Ros Cleal. She views the pottery assemblage, which included some very large chunks of individual vessels, as a set of containers: at least one very large carinated vessel (Cleal 1990, fig. 28, P1), of 7 litres capacity, several open or neutral uncarinated bowls, moderate in size (for example, *ibid.*, fig. 28, P2–P5), small shallow bowls or cups (for example, *ibid.*, fig. 31, P24, P32–34, P41, P42), one small neutral bowl with neck (*ibid.*, fig. 29, P6) and one small closed bowl or jar (*ibid.*, fig. 29, P7). She concludes that the deposit represented the debris from a single major feast, or a period of feasting; and according to the animal bone evidence, this had happened in the summer months. Whole vessels were not represented, and it may be that the bones and chunks of pots had been selected from a temporary midden. A similar interpretation could be applied in the case of the isolated pit assemblage from Rowden in Dorset, although in this case no small cups are present (Woodward 1991, fig. 52). However, a complete range of vessel chunks was found in the famous pit at Pamphill, also in Dorset (Field *et al.* 1964, fig. 3).

Deliberate patterns of deposition are not confined to southern England, as the following examples will demonstrate. Peterborough Ware from a series of pits outside an Early Bronze Age ring ditch at Meole Brace in Shropshire included fragments from eight distinct decorated bowls made from fabrics containing granite and quartzite (Hughes and Woodward 1995). These rocks derived probably from erratics in the local Boulder Clay, and had been deliberately

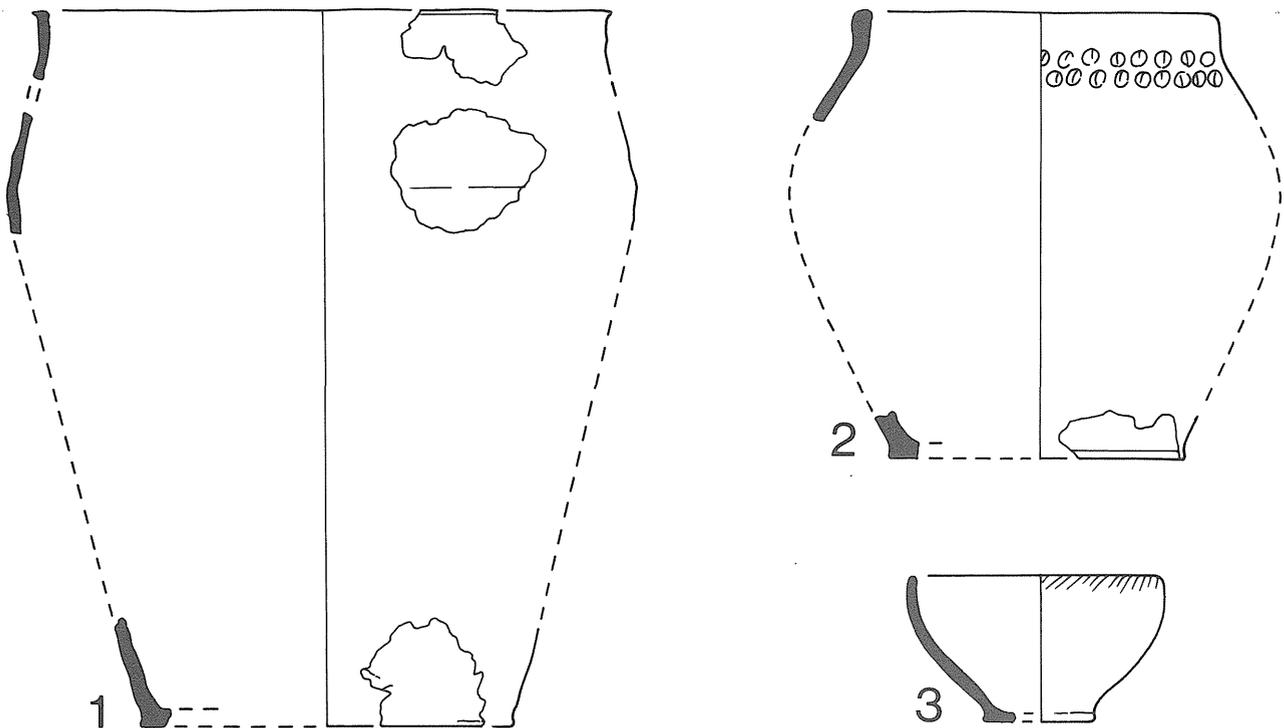


Fig. 2. Nos. 1–3: Late Bronze Age drinking set from Wasperton, Warwickshire (Mark Breedon and Nigel Dodds, BUFAU). Scale: 1:4.

crushed up. Other Peterborough bowls from the west Midlands and from Wales include large and highly visible chunks of angular white quartzite. Alex Gibson has argued that such tempering agents were deliberate magical additions, which served to imbue the special pots with the desired characteristics of the rocks chosen — symbolic strength, or colour. Quartzite boulders are often found at ritual monuments and are shiny, white and luminous (Gibson 1995).

Most Neolithic pottery derives from structured deposits found on sites of a ceremonial nature. Within the predominantly mobile framework of Neolithic existence, ceramic containers may not have been in everyday use, and domestic sites, in the sense of permanent settlements with lasting structures, may have been uncommon. Whether there were pots of a domestic nature, such as pots for everyday food preparation and cooking, can only be tested by rigorous quantification studies of vessel morphology and capacity, fragmentation, and the occurrence of sooting and residues within assemblages from sites of varying size and type.

EARLY BRONZE AGE

Moving on in time to the final Neolithic and Early Bronze Age periods, we find that pots are deposited usually as singletons; they are often whole and often found in funerary contexts. The burials are usually

located in round barrows and they are nearly always single burials, whether inhumations or cremations. The pottery types involved include Beakers, Collared Urns, accessory cups and other urn types. Many of these types are now routinely small in size, and they are highly decorated. Collared Urns tend to be the largest, but in fact many such urns are quite small. Most larger assemblages derive from successive burials in cemetery barrows. Beaker pottery also occurs in large sherd assemblages potentially of domestic type, as studied by Alex Gibson (1982) and Frances Healy (1995), but the nature of sites with such assemblages is still debated, and Robin Boast has argued that at least some Beakers were made specifically for burial purposes (Boast 1995).

I have argued that such burial urns and pots were closely associated with the individuals with whom they were buried. They were the special property of individual men, women or children and held ancestral or heirloom status. At Lockington, Leicestershire, chunks from two very abraded decorated Beakers were found covering the rich assemblage of copper dagger and gold armlets deposited as a hoard just outside a round barrow (Hughes 1996). Two aspects of these Beaker vessels are of particular interest. Firstly, they were deposited as fragments and secondly, like so much Early Bronze Age pottery, the fabrics were tempered with grog — small fragments of crushed pottery. Where were the other bits of these vessels? Many more such

fragments or vessels with small pieces missing are known from the Early Bronze Age burial record. It seems possible that pieces of specific and special pots were retained as mementos or heirlooms, and that some fragments were saved to be ground up and used as grog in new vessels made for other members of a family line or social group. Thus the ancestral and magical values of particular pots could be passed on from generation to generation. Ethnographic examples for such practises are quite well known (for example, Sterner 1989).

MIDDLE AND LATE BRONZE AGE

At the start of the Middle Bronze Age, patterns of ceramic deposition begin to change. This is the time when settled agriculture and the construction of field systems become widespread. At least in Wessex a wide range of vessel shapes and sizes are in evidence — fine wares, everyday wares and storage vessels (Ellison 1981). Are these the first true domestic assemblages? Turning to a consideration of contexts of deposition we find that most Middle Bronze Age vessels derive from burial contexts, especially cremation cemeteries within or just outside round barrows. Thus we can view the continuance of the Early Bronze Age tradition of pots symbolising the individual. When assemblages are found on settlements, as they now are, they are very small. At Thorny Down, Wiltshire, I originally interpreted such an assemblage in terms of functional space (Ellison 1987), but several complete or near-complete globular urns had been deposited in pits. This looks suspiciously like further examples of structured deposition similar to those we have discussed for the Neolithic; now I prefer to interpret these pots as symbolic sealing deposits, made at the time of settlement abandonment.

In the Late Bronze Age, assemblages are much larger, at least in the Thames Valley, but have we thought about how the vessels were deposited in their various contexts? A clue comes from recent finds in Warwickshire, where I have been studying the contents of some isolated Late Bronze Age pits. At Broom, on the line of the Norton Lenchwick bypass, near Alcester, a series of Grooved Ware pits and one containing Late Bronze Age pottery were found adjacent to a small ring ditch containing the remains of a Late Bronze Age cremation pyre. Associated with the pyre were fragments from several bronze cauldrons. The Late Bronze Age pit was lined with green clay and contained many burnt flints and 741 sherds (Palmer forthcoming). These belonged to large portions from five vessels and fragments from seven or eight more. The large vessel portions appear to have been deposited as complete chunks or slabs, and include parts of a very large,

thin-walled jar, a fine, rusticated, medium-sized jar, a jar with nicked rim, most of the base of a plain jar together with rim and base fragments from a small cup. I am interpreting them as yet another 'feasting set': one extremely large vessel, perhaps intended as a communal container for a massive liquid meal, plus some special medium-sized jars and, last but not least, the cup for individual drinking. There is no absolute dating for the pit, but it seems likely at present that this deposit is rather earlier than the cauldrons associated with the adjacent pyre (Woodward in Palmer forthcoming).

A little further north, at Wasperton, a very similar pit deposit was found during the 1980s' excavations of a major complex of early prehistoric, Iron Age and Roman monuments and settlements (Hughes and Crawford 1996, fig. 5; here Fig. 2). The pit was situated amongst some Neolithic pits in an isolated position, but on the line of a significant alignment of Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments. There were a few Neolithic sherds as well as the Late Bronze Age vessels, and the pit had been reused to deposit a jar in the Middle Iron Age. The major vessel (Fig. 2, No.1) was very large and thin-walled, extremely similar in form to the large vessel from Broom, and of exactly the same rim diameter: 320 mm. Associated with it there were fragments from an unusual jar embellished with a double row of fingertip impressions (Fig. 2, No. 2), two plain ovoid jars, together with the substantial part of a decorated cup (Fig. 2, No. 3) and the plain rim of another. There is also evidence that Late Bronze Age deposits of such ceramic feasting sets existed in southern England. Several assemblages are dominated by single very large and thin-walled vessels, as at Cadbury Castle, Somerset (Alcock 1980, fig. 12) and at Combe Hay, Avon (Price and Watts 1980, fig. 24, no. 20). At Norton Fitzwarren, a deposit deliberately made in a ditch terminal contained chunks from two vessels, one large and one smaller (Ellison in Ellis 1989, fig. 19, nos. 27–28; here, Fig. 3, No. 4). Turning to the Thames Valley, careful contextual unpicking of some well-known reports provides further relevant examples, such as the large vessel and associated cups from Maidenhead, illustrated in John Barrett's seminal paper (Barrett 1980, fig. 5; here, Fig. 3, No. 5) and, at Knights Farm 3, another interesting and comparable group of vessels in Feature 181 (Bradley *et al.* 1980, fig. 31, nos. 1–19; here, Fig. 3, No. 6). Thus, in the Neolithic and the later Bronze Age alike, ceramic feasting sets abound. However, in contrast to the earlier periods, in the later Bronze Age there is evidence for some more widespread usage of ceramic containers. Much of the pottery from settlements such as Aldermaston Wharf (*ibid.*) is more homogeneous in form and more fragmented than the groups illustrated in Fig. 3; the pottery

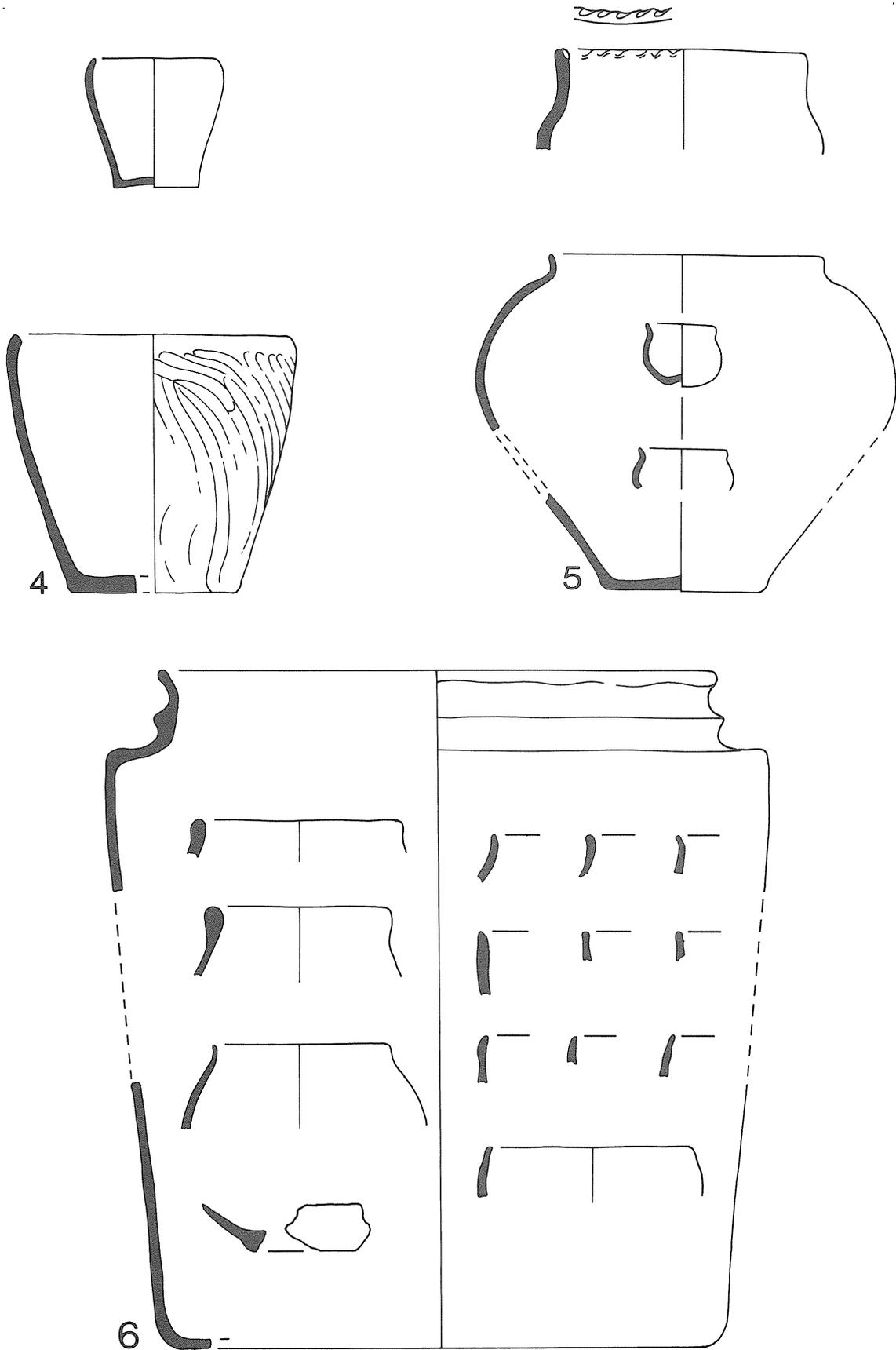


Fig. 3. Late Bronze Age drinking sets. No. 4: Norton Fitzwarren, Somerset (after Ellis 1989, fig. 19, nos. 27–28); No. 5: Maidenhead, Berkshire (after Barrett 1980, fig. 5, nos. 1–4); No. 6: Knights Farm 3, Berkshire (after Bradley et al. 1980, fig. 31, nos. 1–19). Scale: 1:4.

may have entered pits and other contexts as midden material.

IRON AGE

When we think Iron Age we think of large sherd assemblages, but actually these are mainly of *later* Iron Age date. In the east Midlands, Steve Willis (1997) has pointed out that Early Iron Age assemblages hardly exist at all, and in Wessex things may not have been significantly different. Firstly, looking at hillforts, whether it be Danebury or Cadbury Castle, major assemblages contain very little Early Iron Age material. More Early Iron Age material appears to occur on some enclosures: for instance, Gussage All Saints Phase I pottery accounts for nearly 30% of the total assemblage (Wainwright 1979). However, very little contextual analysis has yet taken place. What contexts do the Early Iron Age vessels come from? How large are the fragments or chunks, and what style of deposition is indicated?

One major context type which has been highlighted in recent years is the *midden* (for a recent discussion see Needham and Spence 1997). All Cannings Cross, the principal type-site for the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age period in Wessex (Cunnington 1923) is a multi-phased midden site, and there are also new and even larger midden assemblages, not yet published in full, from Potterne and Chisenbury, Wiltshire. Such sites contain large pieces of special pots — decorated, burnished and highly coloured — and they are thought to derive from episodes of serious feasting: conspicuous consumption in a highly-charged social context. So this pottery does not seem to be domestic or everyday in nature.

At Longbridge Deverill Cow Down, Wiltshire, we can consider some of the pottery that is coming from an undisputably domestic milieu, a round house. The pottery consists of a series of highly burnished and brightly coloured, haematite-coated jars and bowls (Hawkes 1994), but where did it come from within the house? Sonia Hawkes argues that when the house burnt down the pots fell from the shelves of a wooden sideboard or dresser which had been supported in two major post-holes located just inside the door on the left side. She wondered whether these pots were the Iron Age equivalent of the family silver. What do we have sitting on our own 20th-century dressers? Many families have antiques, wedding presents, mementos and the best china — things which only come off the shelf on high days and festivals. The same may well have applied in the Early Iron Age, and those glossy red and black bowls may not have been used on an everyday basis at all.

It is only from the Middle and Late Iron Age periods that pottery becomes really common and

diversified on settlement sites, and for the first time there is a wider range of vessels possibly used in cooking. These include a plethora of medium-sized jars, many of them with sooting and internal residues of food, or limescale derived from the processes of boiling and steaming. Most pottery from later Iron Age sites is found in pit or ditch deposits and it has been argued that many of these deposits of material were ritual in nature (Hill 1995). However, the ceramics do not appear to conform to the rigid types and sets of vessels that have been described above for the earlier periods. These may therefore have been the first truly domestic assemblages.

CONCLUSION

The examples of prehistoric pots discussed in this paper have been selected widely through space and time in order to initiate a more holistic study of vessel function. The existence of communal 'feasting sets' in the Early Neolithic and Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age periods can be contrasted with the more personal and individual 'special pots' that were used and deliberately deposited in pits or with human bodies during the Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age. However, it seems likely that all of these pots were made for very specific and sporadic use, probably at feasts and festivals that occurred at particular seasons, or in conjunction with various rites of passage. Large assemblages of ceramic vessels used for everyday cooking appear not to occur until the Middle or Late Iron Age periods. Even then, however, all vessels may have been imbued with symbolic meaning within the everyday home environment. In this respect, the answer to the question which is the subject of this paper, 'when did pots become domestic?', may have to be: never. The main thrust of the argument is less direct: it is to emphasise that, in many periods of prehistory, pots were bound up with the consumption of food, drink and other substances in various communal and ritually-charged social contexts, and that, in the earlier periods, the existence of 'feasting sets' serves to demonstrate this theory in a dramatic manner. Many of the ideas presented here need to be tested and extended by detailed analyses of vessel capacity, residues, context of deposition, fragmentation and standardisation. The wide employment of the recording systems recommended by the Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group (1995) should enable such analyses to be undertaken over the next decade or so, and results are eagerly awaited.

Meanwhile, returning to Fig. 1, let us have a closer look at the inverted Neolithic pots from Jutland. If the inverted flask is reminiscent of a poppy head, as Andrew Sherratt so perceptively observed, could not the funnel-necked beakers be representations of mushrooms? Wine and beer were

drinks derived from cultivated crops, but were matched by mead, made with honey which probably came mainly from wild bees' nests. Perhaps the opium and cannabis, extracted from controlled plantings, were supplemented by the use of magic mushrooms, a practice which may have originated very early in human prehistory. The inverted funnel beakers perhaps can be seen to represent various of the more common species of fungi. The form of the vessels resembles the shape of the emerging bulbous caps of many species, including the *Amanita muscaria* or Fly Agaric which is a strong hallucinogen and intoxicant. 'The muscles of the intoxicated person start to pull and twitch convulsively, followed by dizziness and a death-like sleep . . . While in this state of stupor, the person experiences vivid visions and on waking is usually filled with elation and is physically very active' (Phillips 1981, 15). The outline of the larger vessel also recalls the form of the very common mushroom *Boletus edulis* or cep (*ibid.*, 192–3), which is one of the best flavoured of all the edible species. Finally, the vertical ribbing on the globular sections of the ceramic vessels may be imitating the raised ribs found on species such as *Phallus impudicus*, the Stinkhorn; this also is edible and is said to be an aphrodisiac, a property possibly inspired by its phallic shape (*ibid.*, 256–7). Any or all of these may have been collected for the preparation of special concoctions in specially designed containers.

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Résumé

Cette vaste revue considère les rôles sociaux des mobiliers de dans la préhistoire Britannique du début du Néolithique jusqu'à l'Âge du Fer Moyen-une période de quatre millénaires. Les résultats de recherches récentes, particulièrement ceux-ci prenant en compte les contenances de mobilier et la situation contextuelle, sont placés ensemble afin d'établir une hypothèse provocatrice et nouvelle. Celle-ci suggère qu'antérieurement au Fer Moyen, la plupart des pots étaient fabriqués et utilisés pour la consommation de nourriture, de boisson et de substances hallucinogènes dans le contexte de rassemblements collectifs et de banquets. Ce n'est qu'à partir du Fer Moyen que les groupements plus grands de céramiques ont inclu une gamme étendue de mobilier ordinaire, utilisé pour la cuisson et pour manger.

Zusammenfassung

Dieser umfassende Überblick beschäftigt sich mit der sozialen Rolle von getöpferten Gefäßen im vorgeschichtlichen Britannien vom Beginn des Neolitikums bis hin zur mittleren Eisenzeit, also über einen Zeitraum von 4000 Jahren. Die Ergebnisse jüngster Forschung, insbesondere unter Berücksichtigung des Fassungsvermögens und des Zusammenhangs der Gefäße, werden mit einander verbunden, um die neuartige und provozierende Hypothese zu belegen, dass vor der mittleren Eisenzeit die meisten Töpfe zum Essen, Trinken und dem Genuss berauschender Substanzen für Gemeinschaftsveranstaltungen und Feste hergestellt und bei solchen gebraucht wurden. Erst von der mittleren Eisenzeit an schlossen größere Gruppen von Keramiken die verschiedensten alltäglichen Koch- und Essgefäße ein.