

Shale Vessels of the Late Pre-Roman Iron Age: Context, Distribution and Origins

DAVID H. KENNETT

The shale vessels of the late pre-Roman Iron Age from Bedfordshire and beyond are a small group of material, in forms corresponding to pottery current in the first century B.C. and the first half of the first century A.D. Most are from burials, but some finds are unassociated.¹ Two basic forms are known: the vase and the cordoned bowl, also found in a footed variety designated as a tazza. All are old finds, most having been discovered in the mid-nineteenth century. The two vases from Old Warden, Beds., were among the discoveries made during the building of the Midland Railway's line from Leicester to Hitchin, via Bedford, in and immediately before 1857. The three vases found at Harpenden, Herts., were discovered when the same railway company built a more direct line from Bedford to London, through Luton, Harpenden and St Albans, in 1867. Land drainage was responsible for the discovery of the two bowls in the rich burial at Great Chesterford, Essex, in 1856, and building work during the expansion of Cambridge revealed an extensive cemetery, unfortunately ill-recorded, at Barnwell, whose most spectacular finds — the shale tazza and an associated find of a handled glass flagon and glass facet-cut cup — date to the first century A.D. The fragment from Lexden, Colchester, was discovered in 1908, and has been described as a tazza, although the lower portion is not extant.

The distribution is heavily concentrated on an axis between Bedfordshire and Essex. Within this axis, other concentrations of rich finds may be noted: bronze bowls, bronze mirrors and 'Welwyn-type' burials stand out. The last-named date to 50 B.C. — A.D.50 and include the two burials at Standfordbury, near Shefford, Beds., two at Welwyn, one at Welwyn Garden City, another at Baldock and a fifth from Hertfordshire at Hertford Heath. In Essex, there is that found in 1849 at Mount Bures while the Cambridgeshire example at Snailwell was discovered in 1952.² The area has other rich and well-documented burials. One thinks of the burial under the tumulus at Lexden, Colchester,³ but worthy of wider cognisance is a

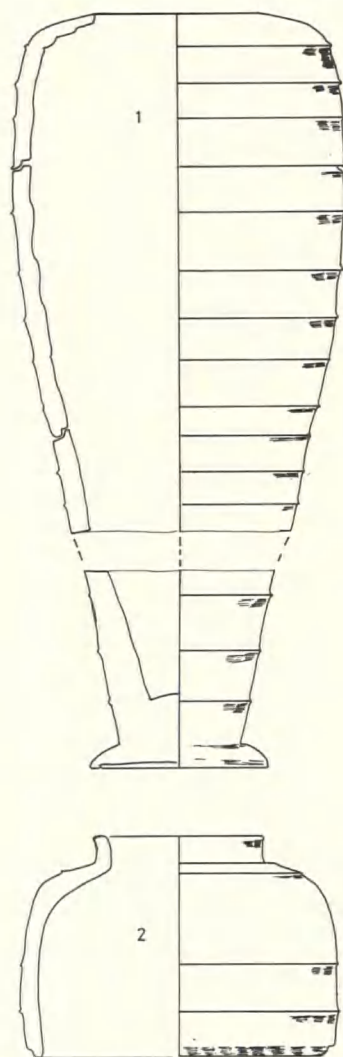


Fig 1 The reconstructable shale vases from Harpenden. (Scale $\frac{1}{4}$)

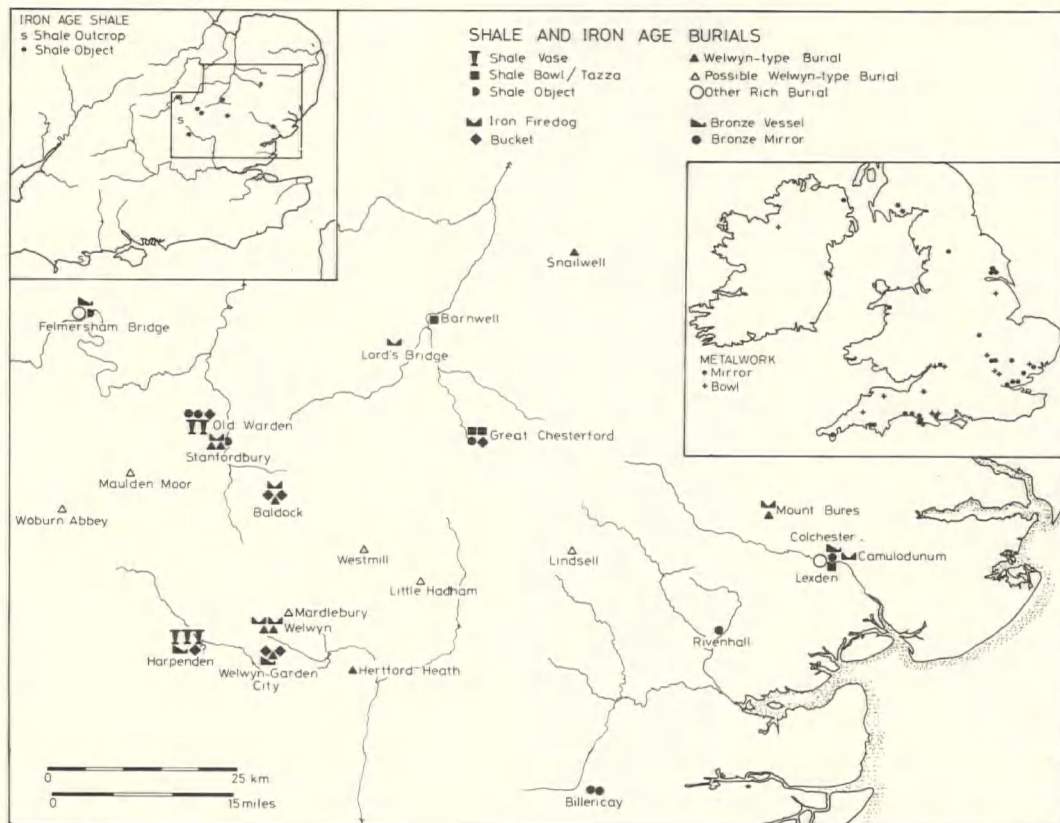


Fig 2 Shale Vessels and Iron Age Burials in Bedfordshire, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Essex.

group of ornamented buckets whose proveniences include the burials at Old Warden and Harpenden⁴ from which shale vases are known and another separate find at Great Chesterford.⁵ Shale vessels, like imported amphorae, may well be used to designate a specific group of rich burials in the area between Bedfordshire and Essex.

Bronze mirrors, too, are often found in burials. An earlier issue of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal* has drawn attention to the richness of the mirror from Old Warden,⁶ and there is a second mirror handle from this group of discoveries.⁷ Decorated mirrors have been found in the area between Bedfordshire and Essex. In the latter county there are the finds from Great Chesterford, Colchester, Rivenhall and Billericay, where both an ornamented mirror and a second mirror handle have been found; there is also a plain mirror from Mucking. Extending the distribution to the north-

west is the celebrated find of the Desborough mirror from Northamptonshire. However, the greatest concentration of mirrors remains the long series from the southern coast of south-west England. There is one from Cornwall, found at Trelan Barrow, St Keverne; from Devon there are the two mirrors from Holcombe and Stamford Hill, Mount Batten, near Plymouth, from which latter site also a now destroyed handle is also known; and moving east, Dorset has proveniences of no fewer than two ornamented mirrors, one plain mirror and three handles, respectively from Verne, and Bulbury, and Portland, and from Bridport, Jordan Hill and Maiden Castle. Of these ten finds, five are from burials: the finds made at Mount Batten, Verne, St Keverne and Portland. Also from a burial is the mirror from Birdlip, Glos., which with the plain mirror from Glastonbury, Som., appears to link the two main distributions of

mirrors in England.⁸

The Birdlip burial⁹ figures too in the link between bronze bowls with ornamented escutcheons known from England. It has two bronze vessels among its contents. Although neither retains its ornamented fixture, the larger clearly from a square perforation was embellished by an escutcheon and the smaller would seem to be more suitably classed as a cup rather than as a large bowl. Such cups have a variety of findspots: in the burial with the Colchester mirror, as an isolated find Keshcarrigan, Co Leitrim, Ulster, and an individual handle from Macon, France, which is probably somewhat earlier than the other pieces.¹⁰ The three cups from Birdlip, Colchester and Keshcarrigan belong to the same general date range as the mirrors and that to which the larger bronze bowls are ascribed. One is the bowl from Birdlip and also from south-west England are those from Rosh Ash, Devon, and Higher Youlton, near Warbstow, Cornwall, the remains of at least two bowls in the hoard from the hillfort at Bulbury.¹¹ All these were made by a combination of lathe spinning and beating in contrast to the purely spun technique, ultimately derived from late Ornavasso type bronzes, found, for example, on the bowl upon which the Felmersham fish-head spout was affixed. The small cups from Keshcarrigan and Colchester are lathe spun. The Felmersham fish-head spout and its comparative pieces and classical precursors were discussed in the last issue of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*;¹² it may stand as an example of a bowl with an ornamented attachment.

Ornamented attachments in the south-western bowls range from the weak cow-head lacking detail on that from Rose Ash, through the stylised ram at Youlton to an unknown style on the bowls from Birdlip; the Macon handle is bovine as are the handles of the two cups. To this series may be added the two ram's heads from Harpenden, now in Luton Museum,¹³ of which illustrations have been published with accompanying ring-handles placed underneath¹⁴ and as bucket escutcheons with the handles separately mounted.¹⁵ The present author, however, would see the two bronze rings as belonging to a separate vessel to the two ram's heads, although it is an attractive suggestion to compare the arrangement initially published with that of the single mounting on the Rose Ash bowl. It is suggested that the two ram's heads were part of a bronze bowl, not otherwise extant, of a profile similar to those from south-west Eng-



Fig 3 The Catuvellauni and Cultural Poverty.

The shaded area represents the Catuvellauni as defined by Dyer.

Each dot is a findspot for a shale vessel, a Welwyn type burial, imported amphorae or an isolated find of fine metalwork, both bronze and iron.

For sources see text.

land and incidentally to the Felmersham bowl; it may be that the two heads from Harpenden were from a pair of identical bowls. The two ring handles would seem to be the two handles from a large cauldron: they are much larger in relation to the ram's heads than the single ring placed through the escutcheon of the Rose Ash bowl is to its accompanying piece. On this interpretation the parallels for these rings would seem to lie with a group of cauldrons found in Denmark: Eggers illustrates that from Illemose, Fyn, and he notes three from Zealand, one from Lolland and a sixth from north Jutland.¹⁶ They are contemporary with a whole series of cauldrons both purely of iron and with iron rims and handles but with a bronze body, which are distributed beyond the Roman world and date to the period between 100 B.C. and 100 A.D.¹⁷ An example from Britain is that

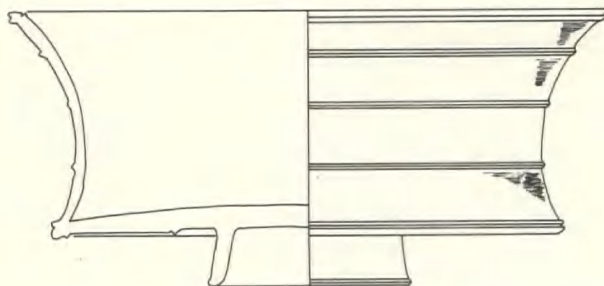


Fig 4 Shale tazza from Barnwell, Cambs. (Scale $\frac{1}{4}$)

found at Letchworth, Herts., in 1961, a rather early example of the type.¹⁸

Against this interpretation, it must be noted that the only fragments of sheet bronze from the Harpenden burial are two pieces and a handle from a bronze bowl¹⁹ whose only close parallel is a bowl found in grave III at Lubsow, (now Lubieszewo), in north Poland.²⁰

Clearly the Harpenden burial displays wide-ranging connections as do the other burials with shale vessels. The two bowls from Great Chesterford are associated with a pair of silver brooches silver chains whose parallels are to be found in Germany, north Italy and the Channel Islands.²¹ It may be thought persons of a culture with sufficient wealth to import goods from the continent could well draw upon the resources of another part of England for the shale vessels.

However, the origin of shale vessels is more complex than would seem to be superficially apparent: bronze mirrors and bronze bowls would both seem to reinforce a connection between the Bedfordshire-Essex region and the Kimmeridge peninsula in Dorset. The Roman shale industry of Kimmeridge began early: a trencher found in grave II of the burials at Grange Road Winchester, Hants., was buried somewhere in the last quarter of the first century A.D. as was another found in a burial at Jordan Hill, Preston, Weymouth, Dorset. Yet the distribution of these objects, for example, demonstrates the localised distribution of the products of the Kimmeridge shale industry in early Roman times: seventeen of the twenty-one known examples are from Dorset, with the others either from London or find-spots on the road thereto.²²

Oil shale of the form found at Kimmeridge is *not* unique to that locality, although the Dorset site is the most extensive outcrop. Along the greensand ridge in Bedfordshire it has been noted as a natural inclusion at a number of places, most noticeably in Flitwick Moor,²³ in the parishes of Maulden, Flitwick and Flitton. Bedfordshire rather than Dorset may well be the origin of the shale vessels from this and adjacent counties. The suggestion receives powerful support from the form of the vessels made. Vase, tazza and bowl all reflect contemporary Belgic pottery forms,²⁴ themselves of fairly localised distribution, not extending to Dorset. It may be that blocks of unworked shale were imported from Dorset, rather than that the Flitwick outcrops were worked. However, the technique of manufacture for shale vessels would involve the same basic apparatus as the manufacture of wheel-thrown pottery.

There are other objects of oil shale in pre-Roman Iron Age contexts: the Birdlip burial includes two beads of the material²⁵ and among the accoutrements of grave B at Stanfordsbury is a bracelet in oil shale.²⁶ The Felmersham Bridge finds include a small fragment from a small ring²⁷ and this albeit small group would seem to point to a local rather than a distant origin for the Bedfordshire pieces.

The Bedfordshire shale pieces and the shale vessels from the county and its neighbours suggest too a further line of enquiry. In the last volume of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*, James Dyer suggested that the Catuvellauni were a non-Belgic tribe.²⁸ By mapping a range of pieces — shale vessels,²⁹ Welwyn type graves,³⁰ imported amphorae,³¹ isolated metalwork finds³² — an

impression emerges. Figure 3 shows the cultural poverty of the tribe in the century between Ceasar and Claudius. The burials and finds delineated on figure 2 are confined to outside the fringe of the area of the Catuvellauni as defined by Dyer; an exception may be Hertford Heath,³³ just south of the bend of the River Lea. The sole findspot within the area is an amphora from Stanmore Park,³⁴ but this may be illusory as indicating any contact beyond the borders now suggested. Except for its fabric, suggesting an early rather than a late date, this piece is of a type primarily of the first and early second centuries A.D. At the beginning of that time span, the shale vessels found in Bedfordshire and beyond belong to an infrastructure of wide contact, while themselves possibly of local origin.

Almost as a postscript, it can be mentioned that shale pieces are found in Saxon graves: examples include two beads from one of the necklaces at Kempston,³⁵ and from Chamberlains Barn, Leighton Buzzard, graves 15 and 32 single beads of unusual form which may be as the Mrs Hyslop suggested spindle whorls.³⁶ A bracelet of a flattened D-section found at Girton, Cambs., is the only item from outside Bedfordshire known to the author. These pieces suggest that the Flitwick outcrop was exploited some four to seven centuries after the late pre-Roman vessels had been made.

APPENDIX I

SHALE VESSELS OF THE PRE-ROMAN IRON AGE

BARNWELL, CAMBRIDGESHIRE

Single tazza from a burial in cemetery found before 1868. Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

Literature C.F. Fox, *Pattern and Purpose*, (1958), pl. 45a.

GREAT CHESTERFORD, ESSEX

Two bowls found in 1856, associated with two pairs of silver brooches.

Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.

Literature R.C. Neville, *Arch. J.*, 14 (1857), 84-87; W. Kramer, *Germania*, 49 (1971), taf. 26 lower.

HARPENDEN, HERTFORDSHIRE

Portions of three vases found 1867 associated with two bronze ram's heads, two large bronze rings, fragments of a bronze bowl with one handle.

Museum Luton Museum

Literature T.W. Bagshawe, *Ant. J.*, 8 (1928), 520-522; C.E. Freeman and W. Watson, *Ant. J.*, 29 (1949), 196-197 with fig 1 a-c, whence H.J. Eggers, *JRGZmMainz*, 13 (1966), abb 6 a-c upon which the constructional details are clear.

LEXDEN, ESSEX

Single, unassociated, fragment from tazza or bowl, found 1908.

Museum Colchester Museum

Literature A. Birchall, *PPS*, 31 (1965), 312 and fig 26, 214.

OLD WARDEN, BEDFORDSHIRE

Two vases from a group of burials found c. 1857, which included the bronze mirror, a second mirror handle, amphorae and possibly a bronze-bound wooden bucket.

Museum (a) British Museum; (b) Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge

Literature (a) *Later Prehistoric Antiquities of the British Isles* (1953), 71 and pl. 23, 3; (b), C.F. Fox, *The Archaeology of the Cambridge Region*, (1923), 96-98, pl. 15, 3.

NOTES

- 1 All shale vessels have been listed in Appendix 1, above.
- 2 I.M. Stead, 'A La Tene III Burial at Welwyn Garden City', *Archaeologia*, 101 (1967), 1-62, with citations to earlier literature; additionally *Ant. J.*, 48 (1968), 306 and pl. 77 for Baldock, with I.M. Stead, 'The Reconstruction of Iron Age Buckets from Aylesford and Baldock', *BMQ*, 35, (1971), 250-282.
- 3 P.G. Laver, 'The Excavation of a Tumulus at Lexden, Colchester', *Archaeologia* 76 (1926-27), 241-254.
- 4 Stead, 1971, 279; for additional references see Appendix 1.
- 5 Stead, 1971, 278 with pl. 91.
- 6 M.G. Spratling, 'The Late Pre-Roman Iron Age Mirror from Old Warden', *Beds. Arch. J.*, 5 (1970), 9-16.
- 7 J. Dyer, 'A second Iron Age mirror handle from Old Warden', *Beds. Arch. J.*, 3 (1966), 55-56.
- 8 The literature on mirrors is extensive. See particularly R.A. Smith, 'On a Late Celtic Mirror found at Desborough, Northants., and other mirrors of the period', *Archaeologia*, 61 (1909), 329-346; C.F. Fox and M.R. Hull, 'The incised ornament on the Celtic mirror from Colchester, Essex', *Ant. J.*, 28 (1948), 123-137; C.F. Fox, 'Celtic mirror handles in Britain with special reference to the Colchester handle', *Arch. Camb.*, 100 (1949), 24-44; C.F. Fox, *Pattern and Purpose, A survey of Early Celtic Art in Britain*, (Cardiff, 1958), 84-105 with figs. 50-67a and pls. 55-58a, 60; C.F. Fox, 'A Celtic Mirror from Great Chesterford', *Antiquity*, 34 (1960), 207-210; A. Fox and S. Pollard, 'A Decorated Bronze Mirror from an Iron Age Settlement at Holcombe, near Uplyme, Devon', *Ant. J.*, 53 (1973), 16-41. For illustrations see Smith, 1909; Fox, 1958; Fox and Pollard, 1973. Figure 2b is based on these with the addition of the handle for Ballymoney, Co Antrim, Ulster, for which see E.M. Jope, *Ulster J. Arch.* third series, 17 (1954), 94-96 with fig. 2, 2-3.

- 9 'The Birdlip Early Iron Age Burials: a review', *PPS*, 15 (1949), 188-190. Good photographs appear in A. Fox, *loc. cit.* n. 11 below, pl. 34 for the bronze bowls.
- 10 Fox, 1958, fig 58; E.M. Jope, 'The Keshcarrigan Bowl', *Ulster J. Arch.* 17 (1954), 92-94; J.V.S. Megaw, 'A Bronze Mount from Macon', *Ant. J.*, 42 (1962), 24-29.
- 11 A. Fox, 'An Iron Age Bowl from Rose Ash, north Devon', *Ant. J.*, 41 (1961), 186-198; B.W. Cunliffe, 'Late Iron Age Metalwork from Bulbury, Dorset', *Ant. J.*, 52 (1972), 298 with fig 4 and pl. 57. The Youlton bowl is illustrated A. Fox, 1961, pl. 33 and Fox, 1958, pl. 51.
- 12 D.H. Kennett, 'Felmersham and Ostia: a metalwork comparison', *Beds. Arch. J.*, 11 (1976), 19-22, with citation to earlier literature.
- 13 T.W. Bagshawe, 'Early Iron Age objects from Harpenden', *Ant. J.*, 8 (1928), 520-522 with pls 82-84; C.E. Freeman and W. Watson, 'Early Iron Age objects from Harpenden: a new interpretation', *Ant. J.*, 29 (1949), 196-197.
- 14 Bagshawe, 1928, pl. 82-83, whence E.T. Leeds, *Celtic Ornament*, (Oxford, 1933), fig 28.
- 15 Fox, 1958, 76-78 with fig 47; good photographs, *ibid.*, pl. 50. This interpretation is rejected Stead, 1971, 280.
- 16 H.J. Eggers, *Der Römische Import im freien Germanien*, (Hamburg, 1951), 159, type 2, with taf. 2, 3 and karte 9.
- 17 Eggers, 1951, 159-160, typen 4-8 with taf. 2, 4-8 and karte 10-11. A good illustration is that from Sande, Norway, in H. Shetelig, H. Falk and E.V. Gordon, *Scandinavian Archaeology*, (Oxford, 1937), pl 30 a.
- 18 J. Moss-Eccardt, 'An Iron Age cauldron-rim from Letchworth, Herts.', *Ant. J.*, 45 (1965), 173-177.
- 19 H.J. Eggers, 'Römische Bronzegefäße in Britannien', *JRGZm Mainz*, 13 (1966), 69-70, 105 nr 32, abb. 6 d; the two individual portions of the bronze bowl are illustrated Freeman and Watson, 1949, fig 1 d-e.
- 20 H.J. Eggers, 'Lubsow', *Prähistorische Zeitschrift*, 35 (1950), 58-111, esp. 71 with taf. 2 a.
- 21 W. Kramer, 'Silberne Fibelpaare aus dem letzten vorchristlichen Jahrhundert', *Germania*, 49 (1971), 111-132, esp. 124-128 with taf 24-26; Kramer, *ibid.*, for parallels.
- 22 M. Biddle, 'Two Flavian Burials from Grange Road, Winchester', *Ant. J.*, 47 (1967), 224-250, esp. 233-234 with fig 6, and 248-250 with table II, and literature there cited.
- 23 H.S. Torrens and J.H. Callomon 'The Corallian Beds, The Amphill Clay and the Kimmeridge Clay', in R.C. Sylvester-Bradley and T.D. Ford (eds.), *The Geology of the East Midlands*, (Leicester 1968), 291-299, esp. 298-299; see also J.H. Callomon, 'The Kellaways Beds and the Oxford Clay', *ibid.*, 264-290, esp. 281 and 283 for shale in exposed geological sections at Stewartby and Bletchley.
- 24 A. Birchall, 'The Aylesford-Swarling Culture: the problem of the Belgae reconsidered', *PPS*, 31 (1965), 241-367, esp. figs 1-26; for Bedfordshire see A.H. Simco, 'The Iron Age in the Bedford Region', *Beds. Arch. J.*, 8 (1973), 5-22 with pottery there figured.
- 25 Green, 1949.
- 26 Stead, 1967, 56 no 16; the whole of the Stanfordsbury burials would repay study for a possible paper in a future issue of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal*.
- 27 F.W. Kuhlicke, 'Postscript on the Iron Age finds from Felmersham Bridge', *Beds. Arch. J.*, 4 (1969) 81 and fig 2.
- 28 J. Dyer, 'The Bedfordshire Region in the First Millenium B.C.', *Beds. Arch. J.*, 11 (1976), 7-18, esp., 14-17 with fig 4.
- 29 This paper, with appendix 1.
- 30 Stead, 1967.
- 31 D.P.S. Peacock, 'Roman Amphorae in pre-Roman Britain', in M. Jesson and D. Hill, (eds.), *The Iron Age and its Hill-Forts*, (Southampton, 1971), 161-188.
- 32 References cited n.2-15 and 18; no item of metalwork (except the Desborough mirror) on fig 3 does not appear on fig 2.
- 33 J. Holmes and W.H.C. Friend, 'A Belgic Chieftan's Grave on Hertford Heath', *T. East Herts. A.S.* 14, pt. 1 (1959), 1-19; Stead, 1967, 44-48 and 50-52.
- 34 J.W. Brailsford, *Guide to the Antiquities of Roman Britain*. (British Museum, 1958 and 1964 eds.), fig 17. 11; Peacock, 1971, 177 and 185.
- 35 British Museum, reg. no. 1891, 6-24, 53. The necklaces from Kempston may not be the original stringings and cannot be related to the original discoveries.
- 36 M. Hyslop, 'Two Anglo-Saxon cemeteries at Chamberlain's Barn, Leighton Buzzard, Bedfordshire', *Arch. J.*, 120 (1963), 177 and fig 9, 15, and 179 with fig 12 k.
- 37 Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Cambridge.
- 38 Paper completed 5 March 1977.

The Bedfordshire Archaeological Council is indebted to Luton Museum for a grant towards the costs of the publication of this paper.