

A POSSIBLE BEAKER BURIAL AT RAMPTON, NOTTINGHAMSHIRE

by

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INTRODUCTION

A small perfectly preserved Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age pottery beaker, probably deposited during the late 3rd or early 2nd millennium BC, was unearthed in January 2000 during excavations by Trent & Peak Archaeological Unit of an extensive Iron Age and Romano-British settlement at Rampton Quarry, Nottinghamshire (SK 820785; Fig.1). This

work was funded by Lafarge Redland Aggregates Ltd as part of a Scheme of Treatment approved within a planning agreement with Nottinghamshire County Council, and was supervised by Mark Southgate under the direction of David Knight. An interim report on the excavations has been deposited with the Nottinghamshire Sites and Monuments Record (Knight 2000) and a summary is included in these *Transactions in Archaeology in Nottinghamshire*.

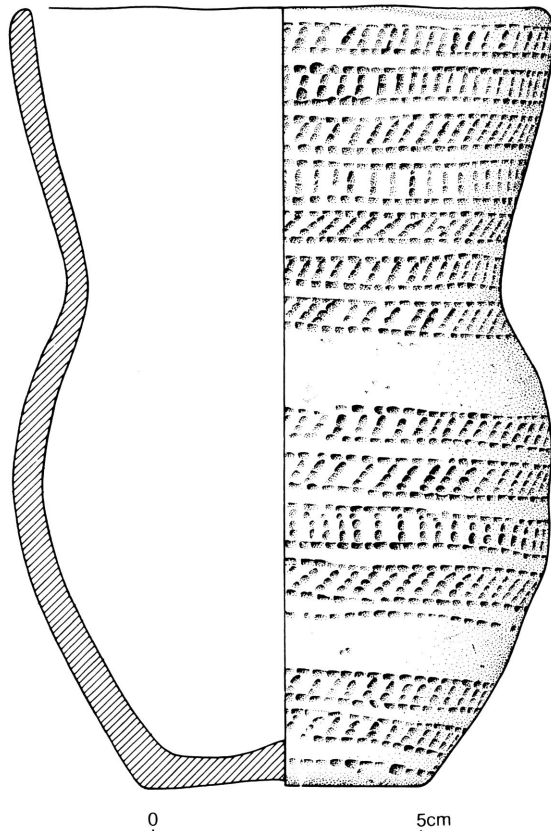


FIGURE 1: Beaker from Rampton

VESSEL CONTEXT

The beaker was retrieved from a small pit recorded near the edge of a low island of Floodplain Terrace sand and gravel raised slightly above the alluvial floodplain of the Trent. This island preserved a remarkable density of later Iron Age and Romano-British features, many of which may have obliterated traces of earlier activity, and there is every likelihood of other early features which had escaped detection. This possibility is strengthened by the close similarity between the fill of the pit containing the beaker and the sands into which it had been dug and by discoveries across the site of small quantities of Neolithic or Bronze Age flint artefacts, mainly redeposited in Iron Age or Romano-British contexts.

The pot had been placed in an upright position near the bottom of a small approximately circular pit (1535). This feature contained a homogeneous reddish-yellow sand with rare (*c.* 1%) manganese mottles and rounded whole stones up to *c.* 5 mm. Its fill merged almost imperceptibly with the paler sands of the Floodplain Terrace and its edges were determined only with great difficulty. It was cut on its eastern side by one of a complex series of intercutting

Romano-British ditches (1519), but fortunately this later feature had only disturbed its upper fill. The sandy fill of the pit was removed carefully by trowel to reveal a roughly circular feature with steeply sloping sides and a rounded base, surviving to a depth of *c.* 0.5 m and up to *c.* 0.7 m wide at the top. No traces survived of bones or of other associated finds, such as might be expected if the pot had accompanied a burial, but inhumed remains are unlikely to have survived in the acidic soil conditions.

The careful positioning of the intact beaker in an upright position at the bottom of the pit suggests ceremonial deposition, perhaps associated with burial, rather than the casual discard of domestic rubbish. Similar intact beakers have been recovered from single burials elsewhere in Britain with individuals of both sexes and all ages, although most commonly with children (Case 1995, 56 & 60) and may have served as drinking containers. Their fine fabrics and elaborate decoration may in some cases have served to assert the identity and social status of the deceased (Boast 1995, 71; Case 1995, 63).

VESSEL DESCRIPTION

Fabric

The vessel was manufactured from a fine fabric, with few visible inclusions on the inner and outer faces. Sparse clear, rounded quartz inclusions, *c.* 1 mm in diameter, plus rare soft angular to sub-angular grey to buff inclusions, possibly grog, up to *c.* 2 mm in diameter, may be observed. It was not possible, because of the complete state of the pot, to obtain a cross-section of the vessel to examine the inclusions. The pot appears to have been fired originally to a light reddish-brown colour on the exterior and to a buff colour internally, but large parts of the outer and inner surfaces seem to have been stained dark brown subsequent to deposition. The core is not visible.

Form

The pot is unusually small in size, only 145 mm high with a rim diameter of 100 mm, but falls nonetheless within the height range of 120–230 mm for this class of vessel (Clarke 1970, 154). It has thin (*c.* 5 mm) walls and weighs a total of 394 grammes. It is of waisted shape, with a high slightly convex

neck above an ovoid body. The rim is simple and rounded. The base is flat, with a raised central boss inside which was probably formed as a result of the technique of manufacture (Clarke 1970, 30).

Surface Treatment

The vessel is decorated over most of its surface with an elaborate pattern of comb impressions. A *c.* 20 mm-long eight-toothed comb was used to execute carefully the horizontal combed lines. The teeth of this comb were mostly cut to a rectangular shape, 1.5 mm wide by 1 mm deep; a round tooth may be detected next to the left-hand end tooth, which itself had a convex outer edge. The decoration comprises three zones of varying numbers of narrow horizontal bands (numbering, from top to bottom, seven, four and two) demarcated above and below by single lines of horizontal comb stamps. These bands were infilled with oblique or vertical comb impressions, executed probably with a shorter comb, apart from the lower zone where both bands of impressions are oblique. Single lines of horizontal comb stamps edge the two lower zones. Two plain undecorated bands were left, one immediately above the girth and the other close to the base; these appear to have been lightly burnished after the impressed decoration was applied. Light burnishing may also be discerned on the outer face around parts of the neck, girth and lower body.

TYOLOGICAL AFFINITIES AND DATING

The beaker compares most closely in form and decoration to Clarke's Primary Northern British/Dutch Beaker Group (N1/D; Clarke 1970, 154). Diagnostic features include the pronounced neck above an ovoid body and the positioning of the waist within the upper third of the vessel, creating a fairly short neck in comparison with some other beaker groups. The grouping of the decoration into three zones, emphasising the shape elements of neck, girth and base, is also diagnostic of N1/D beakers (*ibid.*, 12: style *c*). The simple decorative motifs are characteristic of Clarke's Basic European Motif Group 1 (*ibid.* 424-5: motifs 2 and 5) and, with simple band decoration, occur across the range of beaker groups. All of the 17 N1/D beakers recognised by Clarke were located within 25 miles of the North Sea coast, particularly in the Fen Margins, the Yorkshire Wolds,

the Border Counties and eastern Scotland (*ibid.* 158-9: Appendix 7, map 5); within this group, the closest parallels for the Rampton beaker may be traced, curiously, to several vessels from eastern Scotland (*ibid.*, figs 453, 456 and 458).

Clarke's hypothesis that N1/D beakers represented alien groups from Holland settling in Britain and providing the foundations for subsequent indigenous Northern British beaker developments (N2, N3 and N4 beakers) was rejected by Lanting and van der Waals (1972, 30-2). These Dutch scholars argued against a direct Netherlands origin for British beakers on the grounds that the continental groups are not significantly 'parental' and that N1/D beakers do not sufficiently resemble them. They did not deny the likelihood of some cultural contact between the two regions, however, as witnessed by one beaker from the Veluwe in Holland which they considered could reflect influence from Britain rather than *vice versa* (Clarke 1970, fig. 452; Lanting and van der Waals 1972, 31-2). This particular beaker compares closely with the vessel from Rampton. Lanting and van der Waals also criticised Clarke's typological approach on the grounds that it was too detailed and over-refined, as well as lacking regional perspective, and proposed instead a seven-step model of development for British beakers in four focus geographical areas. This scheme is now more widely accepted than that of Clarke, although his classification is still used for stylistic descriptions of British beakers. The geographical areas comprised Wessex, Yorkshire, East Anglia/Kent and NE England/SE and NE Scotland, while the seven steps were based on neck elaboration and decoration complexity. The Rampton beaker and many of Clarke's early northern beakers may be attributed to Step 4 on the grounds of neck profile and the simplicity of the decoration (*ibid.*, 43; *i.e.* the middle stage of British beaker development). The seven steps are thought to have a certain chronological validity for each focus area, but the relative chronologies between areas and the degrees of overlap or retardation are not known (*ibid.*, 35, 43). Lanting and van der Waals concluded that the only solution to the problem of chronology would be a programme of radiocarbon dating based on the four focus areas.

Unfortunately a British Museum radiocarbon dat-

ing programme for beakers failed to support the typological frameworks (Kinnes *et al.* 1991). It is now acknowledged, however, that this programme should have been conceived on a regional or local rather than national scale, as recommended by Lanting and van der Waals, and that the database was too small. Although it did not demonstrate a linear progression from 'early' to 'late' forms, it revealed an overall time span of *c.* 2600 to 1800 cal BC for British beakers and a tendency towards increasingly complex and diverse shapes and more elaborate decoration over time (Boast 1995, 74). One N1/Step 4 beaker from Boatridge Quarry, Lanarkshire, was included and gave a date range at 95% confidence of 2345 to 1955 cal BC (GU-1117: 3730 \pm 60BP; Kinnes *et al.* 1991, 52; calibration after Pearson and Stuiver 1986 and Pearson *et al.* 1986). A more recent radiocarbon date from bone collagen from a cist burial at Sandhole Quarry, Fetterangus, Aberdeenshire, associated with an early northern style beaker with an S-profile and three zones of simple decoration, calibrates to 2170-1880 cal BC at 95% confidence (GU-2100: 3650 \pm 50 BP; Ralston 1996, 140; calibration after Stuiver and Reimer 1993). A greater number of regional dating programmes may in time establish more reliable chronological frameworks – as demonstrated, for example, by a recent series of radiocarbon dates for beakers from Barrow Hills, Radley, Oxfordshire. The calibrated dates show a broad agreement with the existing typologies, although there are considerable overlaps in age ranges (Barclay and Halpin 2000, 282, table 9.1).

Case originally proposed a simplified classification of early, middle and late beakers (1977) which he later developed on a regional basis using the calibrated radiocarbon dates then available in spans of 250 years (1993; 1998). However, the contextual integrity of dated samples does not appear to have been assessed and, as most beaker-related contexts provide age ranges of 300 to 600 years at 95% confidence (Kinnes *et al.* 1991, 50-64) the 250 year divisions could create a false impression. In addition, his proposed regions differ from those of Lanting and van der Waals and are too vague and fluid for satisfactory application. An attempt was made nonetheless to apply the scheme to the Rampton beaker. It would fall within Case's Middle Phase or Middle Style (or style 2 in his 1993 paper) and possibly

within his regional northern Group B. He suggests that Group B style 2 assemblages date from the third quarter of the third millennium BC or even earlier in northern Britain. Such assemblages may have reached the Midlands and the south from the fourth quarter of the third millennium BC and around the turn of the millennium, with style 3 beakers dominant in the first half of the second millennium BC (Case 1993, 257, 259). In his recently proposed subdivision of Group B into Ba, Bb and Bc (Case 1998), the Rampton beaker would most likely lie in Group Ba, which he suggests has a north-east British origin around the mid-third millennium BC but survives into the earlier second millennium BC.

Current opinion would favour, therefore, a date of deposition for the Rampton beaker in the later third millennium BC or around the turn of the third and second millennia BC, with the proviso that the British Museum dating programme suggests continued manufacture of some early forms of beaker throughout the Early Bronze Age (Kinnes *et al.* 1991; Boast 1995, 73; Barclay and Halpin 2000, 281). Lanting and van der Waals also highlighted the likelihood of some retardation in the north in form and decoration as well as the late continuation of AOC (all-over cord) beakers (1972, 43).

OTHER NOTTINGHAMSHIRE BEAKERS

Beaker pottery is poorly represented in Nottinghamshire, although discoveries in the last few years during large-scale excavations at Rampton and on other major quarry sites in the Trent Valley at Girton, Gonalston (Hoveringham Quarry) and East Carr, Mattersey (Lound Quarry) suggest that the current distribution may reflect in large part only the accident of discovery.

Particularly noteworthy discoveries were made during excavations by Trent & Peak Archaeological Unit at Girton Quarry, also on the Trent Floodplain Terrace and about 20 km upstream of Rampton (H. Jones and G. Kinsley: *pers. comm.*). Two complete but broken beakers were retrieved from pits, both probably accompanying burials. The original beakers were not available for study at the time of writing, but photographs of the vessels during excavation suggest that both are similar in style to the Rampton

beaker. The Girton beakers also preserve three zones of decoration which employ mainly simple motifs of Clarke's Group 1 (horizontal lines of comb decoration and bands of oblique lines or finger nail impressions). They incorporate in addition oblique fringes from Group 2 motifs, which are found outside Britain exclusively in the Low Countries (Lanting and van der Waals 1972, 24). One of the beakers was carefully decorated with closely spaced bands and is waisted in an apparently more angular manner than the Rampton beaker (N1 or 2, Step 4). The other vessel is crudely decorated with widely spaced bands and has a concave neck (N1, Step 3; Table 1). Sherds from a number of other beakers were also recovered from the excavations (not incorporated in Table 1), including examples with incised, finger-nail and combed decoration and a greater range of motifs - notably filled lozenges and panels from Clarke's Motif Group 4 (1970, 427), Lanting and van der

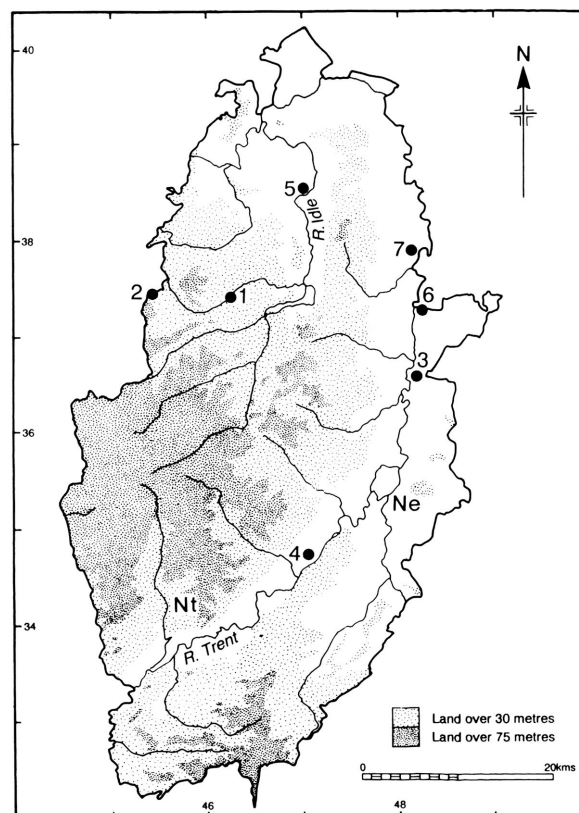


FIGURE 2: Distribution of beaker pottery in Nottinghamshire
 1. Clumber, 2. Creswell Crags, 3. Girton, 4. Gonalston,
 5. Mattersey, 6. Newton Cliffs, 7. Rampton,
 Nt: Nottingham, Ne: Newark

Table 1
 Classifications of Nottinghamshire beakers
 (Table excludes recent discoveries at Gonalston and East Carr, Mattersey)

<i>Site Name</i>	<i>Clarke group</i>	<i>Lanting and van der Waal's step</i>	<i>Case group (1977)</i>
1 Clumber (2 beakers)	S4	7	Late
2 Creswell (2 beakers)	S4	7	Late
3 Girton 1	N1/2	4	Middle
Girton 2	N1	3	Middle
4 Newton Cliffs	S3/4 SH	5, 6, 7	Late
5 Rampton	N1	4	Middle

Waal's Steps 5, 6 and 7 (1972, figs 1-4) and Case's Late Phase (1977). This suggests that a greater variety of beakers was present on the site than was retrieved from burial contexts, perhaps reflecting a combination of chronological variations, wider social contacts and functional differentiation.

These new discoveries represent significant additions to the limited quantity of beaker pottery from Nottinghamshire. Known sites yielding beaker pottery are listed in Table 1, with the conventional classifications of Clarke (1970), Lanting and van der Waals (1972) and Case (1977). These comprise two beakers from Clumber, north Nottinghamshire (Clarke 1970, 493; figs 984-5), an assemblage, including a handled beaker, from pits at Newton Cliffs, on the border of Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire (Garton 1989) and two beakers from Pinhole Cave, Creswell Crags, on the border of Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire (Gilks 1974). It should be noted that the radiocarbon dates of 1960 \pm 120bc (BM-438) and 2170 \pm 140bc (BM-437) from Pinhole Cave, which were claimed to have been from material associated with the pottery, derive from a bulk sam-

ple and hence lack contextual integrity (R. Jacobi: *pers. comm.*). Finally recent discoveries should be noted of beaker pottery from pits revealed during current excavations by Lee Elliott and David Knight at Gonalston and by Daryl Garton, Alison Arnold and Lee Elliott at East Carr, Mattersey (summary in these *Transactions*); these collections have yet to be studied in detail, and hence their typological affinities remain to be determined.

The discoveries at Rampton and Girton of beaker types which were hitherto unknown in Nottinghamshire are of particular interest. They suggest the presence of culturally related groups along the lower Trent Valley which begin to bridge the current gap between the distribution of early northern style beakers in two of the original focus areas - The Fens and East Yorkshire. The role of the River Trent and its tributaries, which connect the Midlands to the Humber Estuary and the North Sea, may eventually prove to have been crucial in developing cultural contacts both locally and farther afield through trade and other mechanisms.

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