

Little Martin's Field, Brightwell-cum-Sotwell BRLMF18

The Prehistoric Pottery

The prehistoric pottery assemblage numbers 254 sherds weighing 4786g. Most of the material dates to an undetermined phase of the middle to late Iron Age, characterised by an enclosure ditch and several pits. The pottery associated with this phase combines typical traits of middle to late Iron Age assemblages found within the upper Thames valley and across southern Britain generally – a preference for sandy fabrics, grey/black surfaces, and sinuous and rounded vessel profiles. Additionally, however, two partially preserved middle Bronze Age urns were recovered from highly truncated, but apparently purpose dug features in the southern part of Area 2. A single flint-tempered sherd from a long ditch in Area 1 is dated broadly to the Bronze Age or early Iron Age, but on the basis of fabric, this sherd could be a stray fragment contemporary with the middle Bronze Age activity in Area 2.

Methodology

Fabrics were identified with the aid of a hand lens and binocular microscope at 20x and 10x magnification, and classified using an alpha-numeric dominant inclusion code, further subdivided on size and frequency of the inclusions, following the recommended guidelines of the Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group (PCRG 2011; 2016). The pottery was recorded by in an Excel spreadsheet by context group, feature or deposit type, and feature group. All fragments were counted and weighed. The following characteristics were entered in separate fields where possible: fabric, form, surface treatment, decoration, degree of abrasion, and spot date. Degrees of abrasion are based on three broad categories: (3) high - surface survival minimum, breaks heavily eroded; (2) moderate - surface somewhat preserved but clearly worn; (1) slight - little indication of wear apparent.

Condition

The pottery is in a generally fragmentary condition, with at least half of the collection recorded as highly abraded. However, there are exceptions to the overall trend. Excluding from the figures the well-preserved (albeit truncated) middle Bronze Age vessels, the average sherd weight (ASW) of just over 10g is typical for an Iron Age settlement site assemblage that includes pottery recovered from ditch fills. The ASW of the Iron Age pit assemblage is higher at approximately 15g, reflecting the generally lower levels of fragmentation and often fresher condition of Iron Age pit deposits.

The middle Bronze Age pottery

Two partial and damaged middle Bronze Age vessels were recovered from features in Area 2. There was no cremated bone or any artefacts associated with either vessel, and the survival of the lower part of the vessel in both cases indicates that they were not inverted in the manner of many Bronze Age cinerary urns.

Feature 2014 yielded the complete basal and undecorated lower wall sections of a vessel of indeterminate form, but a 260mm diameter indicates this was probably a Bucket or Barrel Urn of substantial size (SF1; Fig. xx, no. x). The fabric (F1) is a lightly sanded, slightly micaceous clay with sparse red iron oxides incorporating abundant black and white angular calcined flint up to 4mm in size.

The vessel from feature 2103 was more complete than SF1, with an entire base and lower section, a few rim sherds, and a section of the upper wall preserved (SF2; Fig. xx, no. x). The fabric resembles that of SF1, and sufficient survives to determine that the vessel is a Barrel Urn decorated with applied vertical clay ribs rising to form a loop resembling a horseshoe-shaped handle, linked to an applied horizontal cordon. Both the cordons and the 'handle' are elaborated with fingernail impressed decoration.

This 'horseshoe' handle feature is found on vessels of the slightly earlier Bronze Age Biconical Urn tradition. The so-called Ardleigh Urns found in middle Bronze Age cemeteries in East Anglia and elsewhere in southern Britain borrowed elements from Biconical Urns with horseshoe handles (Erith and Longworth 1960). As the tradition developed during the middle Bronze Age, the initially predominant grog temper was gradually replaced by inclusions of burnt crushed flint, vessels evolved a more barrel shape, and fingertip-impressed decoration and applied ribs or cordons appeared. The fingertip impressions could be applied all over the body of the vessel or restricted to the rim top and/or applied cordons. Fingertip impressed vertical ribs are also a characteristic of the Wiltshire South Lodge urns (Pitt-Rivers 1898; Barrett, Bradley and Green 1991). The Little Martin's Field urn lacks the profuse fingertip decoration on the body that typifies many Ardleigh type urns, but the vertical ribs and horseshoe-shaped looped cordons show some affinity with this and the South Lodge tradition.

The cordons on these large vessels may have been multifunctional. They are certainly decorative, but the vertical ribs also help to strengthen the weak points of large coil-made vessels, and the horizontal cordons would have facilitated lifting and general handling. These vessels are often found inverted over cremated remains in pits, but domestic variants of Deverel-Rimbury urns are found in field boundary ditches, as at Green Park, Reading Business Park (Morris 2004, 78) and from ditches and pits in the East Area of Didcot Great Western Park (Brown reference forthcoming xx).

The Iron Age pottery

The main component of the prehistoric assemblage, amounting to 186 sherds weighing 1947g, is dated to the middle Iron Age, middle to late Iron Age, or indeterminate Iron Age. Most of this material was recovered from enclosure ditch 2321 and a group of pits (102 sherds/1431g). Several smaller ditches – 75, 77, 2312, and 2313 – also yielded a handful of Iron Age sherds. A few abraded sherds of Iron Age style were residual in later ditches 145 and 2315 (13 sherds/67g).

Fabrics and forms

Fabrics

Seven Iron Age fabrics within three ware groups were distinguished. Quartz sand fabrics dominate by a wide margin, and most of the five sub-classes contain glauconite. Six sherds (20g) that are too small to classify are recorded simply as QU-. Fabric I1, represented by only six sherds, is characterised by abundant inclusions of powdery red iron oxides, which may be natural inclusions in the potting clay. Another six sherds contain fossil shell inclusions. The small numbers of sherds prohibit meaningful statistical or distribution analysis, but the fabrics generally reflect the underlying geology of the site, which is mapped as Upper Greensand Formation siltstone and sandstone. The glauconite minerals in the sandy clays derive from eroded Greensand rock.

The fabrics are described below, with quantities and weights in brackets:

QU1 Clay containing fine grade quartz sand and glauconite. Additional inclusions may occur in rare to sparse frequencies – small weathered lumps of white limestone and/or mudstone <3mm, burnt flint, red or black iron oxides [96 sherds/898g]

QU2 Slightly coarser grade of quartz sand than QU1, almost invariably incorporates some combination of rare red iron oxides, rare limestone or mudstone <5mm, occasional quartzite pieces [39 sherds/556g]

QU3 Medium – coarse grade quartz sand and glauconite, other inclusions rare [11 sherds/228g]

QU4 very fine, silt grade quartz sand, slightly micaceous glauconitic clay, few or no additional inclusions [16 sherds/113g]

QU5 Fine grade quartz sand with rare red iron oxides and a rare to sparse but distinctive scatter of sub-angular white quartzite [1 sherd/3g]

S1 Smooth, slightly micaceous clay containing moderate to abundant finely crushed fossil shell, and rare red iron oxides [6 sherds/82g]

I1 Finely sanded, slightly micaceous clay with abundant inclusions of powdery red iron oxides <3mm [6 sherds/23g]

Forms

There are few Iron Age sherds that are diagnostic of vessel form, and none of the pottery is decorated. Even some rim sherds are too small to determine vessel type. Nonetheless it was possible to classify three basic vessel forms – ovoid jars, a hemispherical bowl, and a straight-sided pot.

J – ovoid jars with a variety of rim shapes. Of the five vessels identified, one has an upstanding flattened rim (J1), two have simple, short everted rims (J2), and two have beaded rims (J3). One of the latter has a very high rounded shoulder, typical of shapes that proliferated during the later stages of the middle Iron Age and into the 1st century AD.

B – hemispherical bowl with simple rim. One example

P – Straight-sided jar (saucepan pot). One example

Four rim fragments could not be assigned to a vessel type, and five basal sherds can be described only as a simple flat variety, BS1.

Form	J1	J2	J3	B	P	BS1
Fabric						
QU1			1	1	1	
QU2	1	1	1			2
QU3						1
QU4		1				
S1						2

Table 1: Iron Age pottery form/fabric correlation

The Iron Age pottery in context

Ditch 2321

The L-shaped enclosure ditch produced 42 sherds (288g) of Iron Age pottery, representing almost 17% of the site total, but with a low ASW of 7g, typical of prehistoric ditch assemblages. The pottery from the ditch fills is almost entirely body sherds in fabrics QU1 – QU4, with single examples in fabrics S1 and I1. A single sherd of a type J2 jar in fabric QU4 came from fill 2113 [2107] is a typical middle Iron Age form, but a J3 type in fabric QU2 from fill 2094 [2093] could be as late as early 1st century BC.

Ditch 2312

A mere 6 sherds (35g) of pottery from this possible curvilinear enclosure ditch includes a single fragment of a J2 jar in fabric QU2, along with body sherds in QU1 and QU4.

Ditch 2313

This short length of curvilinear gully produced only 7 sherds (64g) but these include the only example from the site of a 'saucepan pot' (P), a common middle Iron Age form. This vessel is in fabric QU1 and highly burnished. Otherwise, a small base fragment and several body sherds are all in fabrics QU1 and QU2.

Pits

A group of 12 pits together yielded 102 sherds of pottery weighing 1441g. Pits 6, 97, 2153 and 2212 each produced only one or two featureless body sherds, and pits 30, 131, 2155, 2166, 2187, and 2283 contained small collections of fewer than 20 body sherds, most of them in sandy fabrics.

The (albeit small) groups of pottery from pits 2137 and 2157 is more informative. Pit 2137 produced a collection of 21 sherds (500g), which includes two basal sherds, and the only examples of a J3 jar and a hemispherical bowl, along with other highly burnished or smoothed sandy wares. The high shouldered, bead-rim J3 jar in particular suggests the pit was filled during the later middle or late Iron Age. Pit 2157 yielded only a dozen sherds (66g), but amongst them a J1 type jar and several sandy ware body sherds, which have clear middle Iron Age traits.

Discussion

The prehistoric pottery assemblage is small and lacking in sufficient distinctive features to warrant extensive comparisons with other middle Bronze Age and middle to late Iron Age finds in the immediate region, and further afield. This applies especially to the Iron Age assemblage.

Nonetheless, the remnant of a decorated Deverel-Rimbury urn with a derivative horseshoe handle is noteworthy in its affinities with urns Ardleigh and South Lodge Urns. The fact that these vessels were apparently placed in purpose-dug features, but lacked any cinerary remains does not mean that they had no funerary associations, in that the burial of cinerary urns with only partial remains (or none), can signify that the cremated material was distributed amongst relatives or mourners, and only a 'cenotaph', or symbolic deposit made

to mark the event (McKinley 1997 and pers. comm.). However, Deverel-Rimbury urns are also found in domestic settings, where they may have been used for storage.

The Iron Age assemblage, although small and fragmentary, clearly lacks any early Iron Age component. The rounded shapes with smoothed or burnished surfaces, and the predominance of glauconitic sandy fabrics indicate that the entire group dates to the middle and/or late Iron Age, and that there was no early Iron Age activity at this location. The site lies a short distance to the east of Didcot and south of the Iron Age hillfort of Sinudon Camp (Castle Hill), and there are similarities in the middle Iron Age pottery collections from these sites. Some of the components of the Little Martin's Field fabrics resemble those from these two settlements (Edwards 2010, 48 and 55; Brown forthcoming xxx), most notably glauconite, calcareous and marl inclusions, and occasional fine fossil shell. The rare ferruginous fabric I1 has a direct parallel at Didcot, so the vessels in this fabric may have been produced at the same site/s, and clearly from similar raw materials. Further afield, at sites including Gravelly Guy (Duncan, Lambrick and Barclay 2004, 264 – 267) and Cresswell Field, Yarnton (Booth 2011, 348 - 365) similar fabrics and ovoid and hemispherical forms are identified in the middle Iron Age pottery assemblages. However, the size, character and condition of the Little Martin's Field collection precludes intensive comparative analysis.

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