

PREHISTORIC AND ROMAN POTTERY FROM LUNDY

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ABSTRACT

Assemblages of Middle Bronze Age Biconical and Late Bronze Age Plain Wares are identified from hut circles. This pottery was made on Lundy, but some from apparently imported estuarine clay. A single Iron Age sherd has been identified. Briquetage indicates salt production during the Late Bronze Age and Roman periods. An assemblage of Roman pottery is entirely composed of vessels brought in from beyond North Devon.

Keywords: *Bronze Age pottery, Iron Age pottery, Roman pottery, salt production.*

INTRODUCTION

Collections of prehistoric pottery were found during excavations carried out for the Lundy Field Society by K. S. Gardner (1972) in the 1960s and small quantities have been retrieved from surface disturbances by several different members. A series of test pits dug across an area south of Quarter Wall 1988-90 also produced a few prehistoric sherds (Schofield & Webster 1989; 1991). The National Trust, through its archaeological staff Shirley Blaylock and Caroline Thackray, initiated the study of this material in 2004. Full publication will take place after further petrographic study has been carried out, in the Proceedings either of the Devon Archaeological or the Prehistoric Society. In the course of 2004, the assemblage of Roman ceramics found by Charles Thomas during the excavation of the Beacon Hill cemetery in 1969 was also passed to the author for publication. This article presents a brief overview of the results to date.

No associated charcoal or other material such as organic residue on pottery is available for radiocarbon determinations so that all dating suggested is tentative and derived from comparanda with other assemblages.

SOURCE AND PRODUCTION

Initial petrographic work by Dr R. T. Taylor indicates that all of the prehistoric pottery and briquetage (ceramics used in the production of salt from sea water) was made on Lundy.

Some pieces display spalling and variegated colouring indicative of bonfire firing. Two different clays appear to have been used, the first almost certainly deriving from the Brickfield area, the second smooth and clean of the type deposited in estuarine conditions and unlikely to have been present on Lundy. Both clay types have added inclusions of granitic material which has been sorted to some extent so that the proportions of minerals present differ from those in the parent rock. The importation of clay to Lundy for pottery manufacture is surprising, but, if confirmed by detailed thin-section analyses, adds to an emerging pattern of complex procedures for prehistoric pottery production in the west of Britain.

BRONZE AGE BICONICAL ASSEMBLAGES

These are simple bipartite vessels, generally undecorated but often with lugs. Away from Lundy, assemblages from Brean Down in Somerset (Woodward 1990) and Shaugh Moor on Dartmoor (Tomalin 1982) have radiocarbon determinations covering the 18th to the 11th centuries BC. The principal Lundy group comes from North End Hut Circle 6 excavated by Gardner and includes parts of at least six vessels, three with lugs. Other Biconical sherds come from other excavated North End hut circles, as surface finds close to Widow's Tenement and from Test Pit 235 south of Quarter Wall. This material indicates that the North End Hut Circles are likely to date to the Middle Bronze Age and to be broadly contemporary with the majority of prehistoric settlement on Dartmoor. Initial published comment on the date of the excavated material (Gardner 1972) suggested that this might be Late Bronze Age, a date which can now be seen, in the light of advances in the understanding of ceramic typology over the last three decades, to be too late. Biconical pottery is uncommon in South West Britain, most of the Middle Bronze Age Dartmoor ceramics belonging to the Trevisker tradition, which has different shapes and is generally decorated. A single surface find with a cordon from the Middle Park area may be Trevisker. The reasons for the presence of two contemporary ceramic styles on different Middle Bronze Age settlements are not understood.

LATE BRONZE AGE PLAIN WARE

These are simple straight or slightly curved walled vessels, without lugs or any form of decoration. A good assemblage has been published from Brean Down (Woodward 1990) with radiocarbon determinations covering the 11th to the 9th centuries BC. The Hut Circle excavated by Gardner in 1966 on Beacon Hill produced an assemblage of at least seven vessels. The Hut Circle found underlying the adjacent Beacon Hill cemetery by Charles Thomas in 1969 (Thomas 1992) also has ceramics of this date. Both Beacon Hill Hut Circles also produced pieces of briquetage indicating the production of salt on Lundy in the Late Bronze Age. Evidence for salt production in the Bronze Age has only previously been found in the Bristol Channel area at Brean Down (Foster 1990). Other Late Bronze Age Plain Ware sherds, likely to be of the same broad date as that in the Beacon Hill Hut Circles, came from Middle Park I a cairn possibly infilling a Hut Circle, Middle Park II a Hut Circle, and from a North End Hut Circle not locatable to a specific site. At present Late Bronze Age Plain Ware appears to be the most widely distributed ceramic form on the Island. It is not common in Devon and no settlement on Dartmoor has so far produced it.

MIDDLE IRON AGE SOUTH WESTERN DECORATED WARE

A single sherd with an incised geometric design came from a North Hut Circle not locatable to a specific site. South Western Decorated Ware (Glastonbury Ware) is the main ceramic style in Devon and Somerset in the 4th to 1st centuries BC and has only previously been found in Devon at the cliff castle of Embury Beacon. This sherd was made of Brickfield type clay with granitic inclusions.

ROMAN ASSEMBLAGE FROM BEACON HILL CEMETERY

The Hut Circle found by Thomas (1992, Fig 3) beneath the Early Christian cist grave cemetery was recognised to have produced Roman material; only the 2004 scanning of the pottery demonstrated the presence of Late Bronze Age sherds, indicating that the structure is likely to have been of prehistoric origin and rebuilt during the Roman period. A drain included a rotary quern in its capping, an artefact not introduced until the last few centuries BC. Around 80 sherds are of Roman date. The largest group consists of black-burnished ware from the Poole Harbour area of Dorset and contains forms current from the late 2nd to the 4th centuries AD. South Devon Ware, probably made in the Dart Valley, was represented by sherds of 3rd and 4th century date. The remaining sherds appear to be Exeter Gritty Grey Ware, produced from the earlier 2nd to the early 4th century probably somewhere in the Exeter area; these require further detailed study. It is noteworthy that no local fabrics are present and domestic pottery appears not to have been made on Lundy in the Roman period. Here the situation appears similar to that across Exmoor where both domestic sites and those connected with iron production in the Roman period produce pottery in the three broad groups represented on Lundy and there was no local ceramic industry. (Information from P. Bidwell, G. Juleff, L. Bray).

Salt production however was again taking place on Lundy. Lundy-made briquetage was found mixed with the Roman pottery. Roman-period briquetage has distinctive forms, vessels with straight-sided outward sloping sides and shallow trays, and these are present at Beacon Hill cemetery. Finds of Roman briquetage are fairly common in the South West, especially in the Somerset Levels and in places on the Cornish coast.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This study has enabled, for the first time, dates to be applied to prehistoric settlements on Lundy. Hut Circles, and therefore associated field systems, can be assigned to dates within the Bronze Age, earlier than had previously been supposed. Similarities between the Biconical and Late Bronze Age Plain Ware assemblages on Lundy and at Brean Down may suggest some form of contact between communities along the Bristol Channel coasts. Recent study of prehistoric pottery across Devon is showing that use of ceramics was not continuous and that many communities, especially during the 1st millennium BC the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age, were aceramic. There may well have been periods when settlements on Lundy were aceramic; the pottery, even assuming that the assemblages available for study represent all those once used on the island, can not be used as an indicator for the presence or absence of settlement.

The same potting traditions are apparent in both the Middle Bronze Age Biconical and the Late Bronze Age Plain Ware assemblages, with the use both of a local Brickfield-type clay and an apparently imported estuarine clay, each with added granitic inclusions. The confirmation of the nature of the estuarine clay and an indication of its source are important to establish before full publication of the assemblage. Current work by the author with Dr R. T. Taylor on gabbroic clays from the Lizard in Cornwall is indicating that these were moved around the coast to be potted, with the addition of locally sourced inclusions, in a variety of locations in the Bronze Age, a pattern of procurement for the components of pots apparently similar to that displayed by the inhabitants of Lundy. The single Iron Age sherd is made entirely from components available on the Island; until further finds provide a sufficient range for conclusions to be reliably drawn, the continuance of the use of the apparent imported clay and the terminal date for this practice must remain open.

Data for the production of salt, both in the Late Bronze Age and in the Roman period, forms a valuable addition to our knowledge of former Island activities. It is noteworthy that other locations which produce prehistoric or Roman briquetage are all low lying. On Lundy brine must either have been evaporated in the area by the beach, probably wider during the prehistoric period, or have been hauled up on to the Island top.

The Roman ceramics provide useful confirmation of the situation demonstrated by current work on Exmoor. Overall the pottery is being studied at a time when rapid strides are being made in our understanding of both the ceramic sequence in the South West and of the ways in which pottery was manufactured, used and valued amongst early communities. Hopefully these advances in understanding will allow for some explanations of the unusual characteristics of the assemblages and provide additional insights into the lives of early communities on Lundy.

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