

PETROLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF BRONZE AGE AND IRON AGE
POTTERY FROM BREAN DOWN, SOMERSIT

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Introduction

A representative selection of pottery recovered from Brean Down (ApSimon et al, 1961) was submitted for detailed fabric examination by thin sectioning under the petrological microscope. The purpose of the analysis was to establish tentative fabric divisions for the pottery in advance of further excavations at the site (Bell and Straker, 1984). The majority of the pottery examined is Bronze Age in date and most of it has previously been macroscopically described and illustrated, with full details of layer nos. and contexts (ApSimon et al, 1961). The figure nos. quoted here refer to the latter publication. The headland of Brean Down is a Carboniferous Limestone ridge lying immediately to the south of Weston-super-Mare. Large-scale erosion in the area has produced a sand cliff, which is still receding.

Petrology

On the basis of the range of non-plastic inclusions present in the pottery sherds, a number of fabric divisions have been provisionally made.

1) Grog

Grooved ware sherds Fig. 25.4 (M11. 7/371) III 8A.

Rim sherd of urn Fig. 27.22 (M11. 7/123,201) III ?6.

Biconical Urn of Wessex type Fig. 27.23 (M 11. 7/363) III 6B.

Biconical Urn Fig. 27.29 (M11. 7/323-4) III ?6B.

Base sherd Fig. 27.27 (M11. 7/15) no provenance.

Bodysherds M11. 7/107,114,116,118,119 ? III-IV ?5B.

Rim sherd of hard black ware Fig. 27.41 (M11. 7/337) II-III base of 5.

Rim sherd of black ware Fig. 28.43 (M11. 7/56) ?III ?4.

All of the above sherds contain scattered angular inclusions of grog (crushed up pottery). Due to the nature and widespread use of grog tempering in late Neolithic and Bronze Age pottery, it is difficult to suggest an origin for these sherds, other than a local one, on that basis alone (Clark, 1970; Peacock, 1970; Darville, 1982).

2) Quartz

Bodysherd of hard dark greyish-black ware Fig. 28.50 (M11. 7/135)
pre-war no provenance.

Base sherd M11. 7/156 no provenance.

Both sherds contain frequent subangular grains of quartz, together with a slight scatter of argillaceous fragments. It is difficult to be sure of the identification of the latter. They may represent pieces of grog, in which case they would belong to the above group, on the other hand they appear slightly more rounded, which may suggest naturally occurring clay pellets.

3) Calcite

Sherd of coarse gritty ware (Iron Age) Fig. 29.14 (M11. 7/277) u/s.

Rim sherd associated with gold bracelets 6/12/83 Crabtree (4).

Small bodysherd in bag with M11. 7/323-4 M11. 7/325.

All three sherds contain large twinned angular fragments of calcite scattered throughout the fabric, together with some grains of quartz. The large size, comparatively fresh condition and angularity of the calcite strongly suggests that it was deliberately crushed and added to the clay as a tempering agent. Calcite can be obtained from the local Carboniferous Limestone deposits of Brean Down, although in the case of the Iron Age sherd it may be worth noting that one of Peacock's (1969) fabric groups for Glastonbury ware was calcite tempered, and an origin in the Mendips suggested.

4) ?Limonite

Rim, bodysherds and base of fine greyish-brown ware Fig. 27. 31-33
(M11. 7/291-308) III 6B & 6C.

Thin sectioning shows frequent subangular grains of quartz and a little limestone, both with what appears to be a brown coating of limonite, together with light brown grains of ?limonite. Limonite has been identified in an examination of the soil samples at Brean Down (Cornwall, 1961), and if correctly identified here suggests a local source for the vessel.

5) Igneous

Bodysherd with burnished slip M11. 7/217 II-III Pit.

Thin sectioning shows frequent discrete grains of plagioclase feldspar, together with a little mica, quartz and a fragment or two of sandstone. The amount of plagioclase present suggests derivation from an intermediate or basic igneous rock. It is difficult at this stage to speculate on a possible source, though a local origin seems unlikely.

References

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