

Funerary and Related Cups of the British Bronze Age

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This work is dedicated to

Dr Ian Longworth

to acknowledge his contribution to the study of Neolithic and Bronze Age ceramics and in gratitude for his customary generosity in allowing access to his research.

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Introduction

The aim of this study is to present a usable corpus of a remarkable and fascinating class of Bronze Age pottery that has received much attention since the C18th to the present day but about which opinions differ and around which myths have been constructed and perpetuated. Bronze Age Cups, mostly from funerary contexts, encompass a great variety of forms and styles. They are known by a number of different names, mostly relating to imagined or hypothetical but unproven function, and they show a significant range of form and decoration. Their manufacture can vary considerably from exquisitely made in fine fabrics, with highly and carefully executed decoration including coloured inlays to rough, coarsely made vessels, carelessly decorated or undecorated altogether. They can be deposited complete or in a fragmentary state, not just broken, but incomplete with pieces actually missing. They are found with cremations and inhumations, with adults and children, with discrete and multiple burials. They may be associated with larger vessels or occur on their own and can also be found amongst the comparatively rare domestic assemblages of the Early Bronze Age.

Corpora have gone out of fashion in recent years but those of us who work with Bronze Age ceramics still find Clarke's Beakers (1970) and Longworth's Collared Urns (1984) invaluable tools despite the new discoveries that have since come to light. Their value is in the data that they present, the illustrations that they provide and the references that they contain. Indeed, both corpora were used to present alternative chrono-typological hypotheses shortly after their publication. Clarke's complex Beaker types and groups along with his multiple invasion theory were questioned by Lanting and van der Waals who published their more regional Step scheme in 1972. Longworth's Primary and Secondary Series Collared Urns were remodelled into an Early, Middle and Late scheme by Burgess in 1986. Neither alternative scheme could have been easily formulated without the data that the original corpora contained.

Perhaps the current unpopularity of corpora is due to the fact that they are becoming increasingly difficult to compile given the heightened excavation activity in developer-funded archaeology and the fact that many discoveries may lie hidden in the 'grey literature' rather than in mainstream publications. Local government cuts in the 'Age of Austerity' have made some museums difficult to visit, especially as some are now having to levy access charges on independent, and often self-funded, researchers. Corpora were never regarded as complete datasets given that new discoveries were and are continually being made. The late Colin Burgess told one of us (AG in 1981) 'Don't worry! Like all corpora yours will be out of date the day it is published.' This is depressingly true but should not deter us from the attempt and this corpus is presented with this acknowledgement and in the face of some of the access issues mentioned above.

The literature is full of many generalised statements regarding cups. They acted as chafing vessels bringing kindling to the pyre. They are associated with cremations. They are associated with children. They were used for burning incense or mind-altering substances. The second aim of the present writers was to question and examine these interpretations and largely unsubstantiated statements. They stem from antiquarian conjecture in answer to what is probably the most frequently asked question in archaeology: "what was it for?" From

Stonehenge to cups or cup-marked stones the question remains the same and the answers are often challenging, however when dealing with the prehistoric past, the question should probably never be posed. We can rarely answer it and although we may have clues, they are just that: clues upon which is based much interpretation and, indeed, groundless speculation. Classes of artefact as varied as cups may have served a variety of roles and indeed it may have been the 'meaning' behind their deposition that was their purpose.

Cups, as the name suggests, are diminutive vessels but, for the sake of compiling this corpus, it was decided to keep a slightly flexible approach to the sizes of the pots depending on their form and context. Generally a height of up to 100mm was chosen as the cut off point for inclusion in this study but this has not been applied rigorously and other slightly larger vessels have been included if they appeared, for example, to have recognised cup forms. In adopting this approach, it has been shown that whilst much smaller versions of Beakers, Collared Urns and Food Vessels exist there is also a distinct group of vessels that are clearly not just miniature versions of larger forms. Despite their distinctiveness, they are closely related to the larger vessels in terms of decorative motifs and techniques as well as elements of form.

The basis of this study was an unpublished corpus of vessels compiled by Dr Ian Longworth and housed at the British Museum. After his retirement and with his customary generosity, access to this corpus was granted to one of us (AG) and this work is consequently dedicated to Dr Longworth in recognition of his help and support. The corpus was up-dated by the present writers and two MPhil theses resulted from this (Hallam 2015; Copper 2017). Both studies involved tracking down the cups to the relevant museum and, where possible, visiting the museums to examine the cups at first hand. Not all cups were seen. Some could not be traced or found, and some museum collections could not be accessed or were subject to time restrictions. Where seen, the cups were drawn at 1:1. The Scottish and Welsh corpora were augmented by AG and again relevant museum visits were made to examine and draw the object though only the NMGW in Cardiff was accessed for the Welsh material. The majority of cups in the Welsh corpus have been redrawn (by AG) from published sources. The corpus was constructed in four sections: Southern England comprising England south of (and excluding) the counties of South Yorkshire, Lancashire, Greater Manchester and Derbyshire (CC), Northern England from and including these aforementioned counties to the Scottish border (DH), Wales (AG) and Scotland (AG).

In this study, Chapter 1 provides a brief history of the study of cups from antiquarian beginnings to the present. Chapter 2 examines the variety of forms and decoration and provides the simplified typology used in the study. Chapter 3 considers the ceramic technology of the cups including damage through use. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 examine the archaeological contexts of the cups, their human and artefactual associations and chronology. The discussion and conclusion are presented in Chapter 7. The corpus and bibliography conclude the volume.

Chapter 1

A Potted History of Cups

‘The strange notion suggested by the late Mr John Fenton in his account of this curious discovery can scarcely be accepted. He observes that these little vessels “may have appertained to inhabitants of diminutive stature that existed among the Celtic tribes at a prehistoric period” and he added that vestiges of such a supposed race of pygmies have occurred likewise in Wiltshire, with very small bronze weapons and stone celts’ (Stanley & Way 1868, 217-293).

Cups and antiquarians

In the 18th and 19th centuries antiquarians noted that as well as vessels that would become known as Beakers, Food Vessels and Collared Urns accompanying some “Ancient British” burials, there were occasionally other ‘urns’ that were distinctive in terms of their diminutive size and often highly intricate decoration. Amongst these early investigators was Sir Richard Colt Hoare who, assisted by William Cunnington, was responsible for opening up numerous barrows across Wiltshire. Their findings were published in volumes I and II of ‘*Ancient Wiltshire*’ and included detailed woodcut illustrations of many grave groups including several of these small cups (Figure 1.1). Wessex especially seemed to provide a rich source of a number of particularly elaborate examples. Colt Hoare chose to call these small vessels ‘Incense cups’ or ‘*thuribula*’ on account of the fact that a number of them appeared to be perforated as if for the purpose of burning some kind of aromatic substance (Colt Hoare 1812, 25).

The acquisition of Bronze Age ceramics for personal collections became a popular past-time and there was much debate as to the roles that the cups may have served within the funerary context. One theory, postulated by Jewitt (1870), was that the cups may have functioned as containers for the remains of infants, possibly on account of their small size. The association of cups with Collared Urns strengthened this notion with the presumed mother buried alongside her infant in the accompanying urn. This mother/child hypothesis has persisted in the archaeological literature. Jewitt even went so far as to suggest that infanticide may have taken place in order for the child to accompany the mother to the afterlife.

In 1923, Mann further suggested that the perforations through the walls of a number of the vessels enabled the souls of the infants to communicate with those of the mothers (Mann 1923, 101). Somewhat earlier, James Dobie (1839, cited by his son, John Dobie 1878, 685) suggested that the cups may have been used as specialist containers and conjectured that ‘the small urns were perhaps for receiving the ashes of the brain and heart, while those of the body were lodged in the larger vessel’ (i.e. the cinerary urn). Dobie was, no doubt, drawing inspiration from the canopic jars of ancient Egypt but, unless burnt separately, he does not explain how the ashes of these organs might have survived the cremation process in a state that might be distinguishable from the other calcined remains and pyre detritus. Ferguson (1895, 297) was one of the first to suggest that the cups may have functioned as chafing vessels, namely receptacles used for bringing lit tinder and kindling to the pyre, as part of the funerary rituals involved in the process of human cremation.

FUNERARY AND RELATED CUPS OF THE BRITISH BRONZE AGE

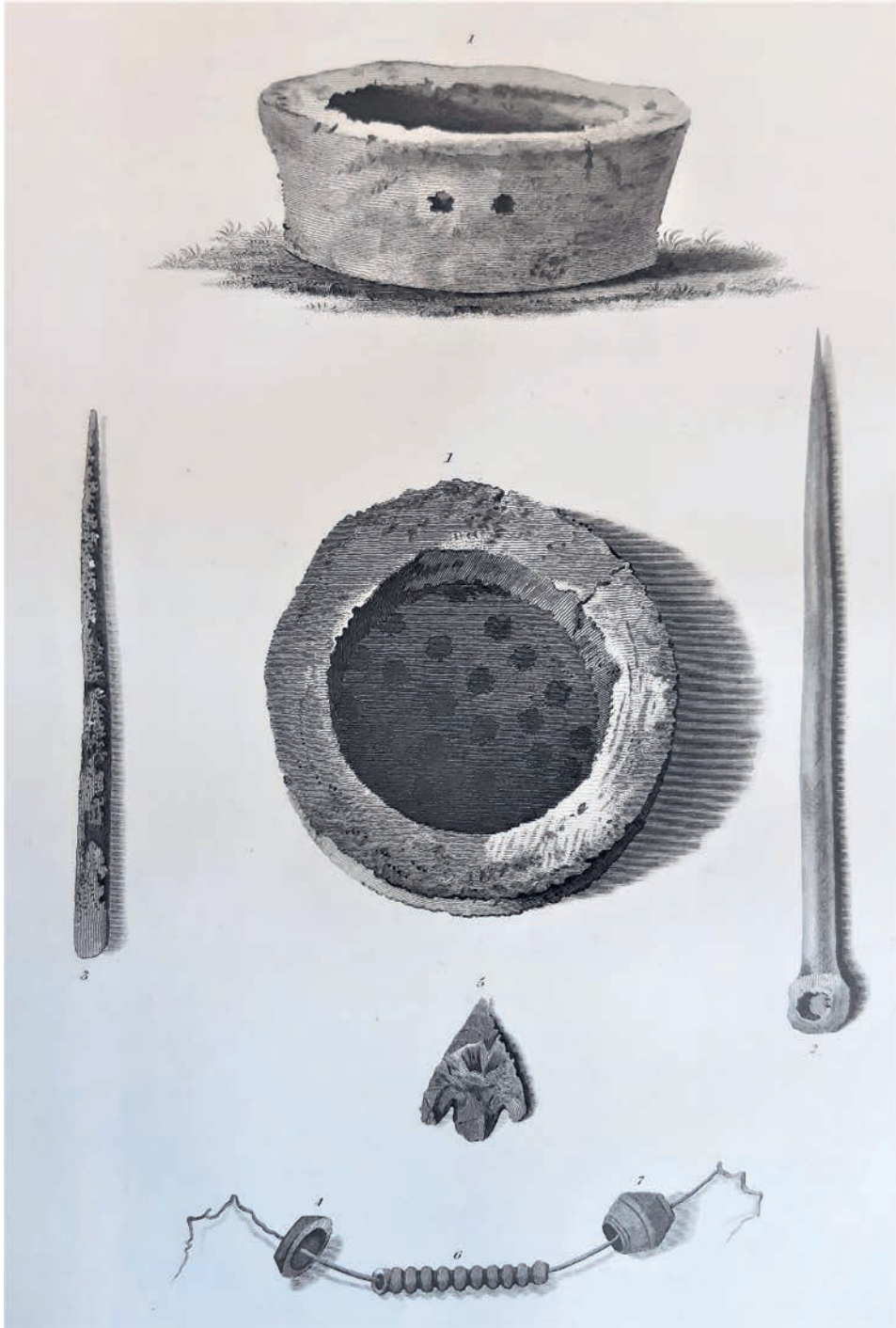


Figure 1.1 Colt Hoare's illustration of the multiperforated cup and associated artefacts from Wilsford G36f/ Lake (WILT/65). From Colt Hoare, 1812, Pt1, Plate XXX..

It is worth noting that all of these interpretations were based on conjecture and hypothesis without any basis in observable fact although Colt Hoare did notice instances of blackening inside some cups. But this phenomenon was rare and could easily result from firing or burial conditions rather than from primary use.

Classifying the cups also became a preoccupation with the early archaeologists. Thurnam presented a typology consisting of three main types (I-III) based principally on form but he noted that there were 'numerous sub-forms and six well-marked varieties' (labelled $\alpha - \zeta$ 1871, 359). He noted simple cups (I), contracted cups (II) and expanded cups (III) and the six other distinctive types ($\alpha - \zeta$), comprised nodulated (Grape Cups), compressed, handled, basket, slashed and strainer cups, thereby already exemplifying the highly diverse nature of these vessels. Thurnam also drew attention to the fact that that some types were restricted to certain areas, such as Grape Cups and Aldbourne Cups in Wessex, whilst other very similar, almost identical, cups were far more geographically dispersed. He was also unconvinced by the idea that the perforations, so often found on the side of cups, served as suspension holes and remarked 'it has generally been maintained that these holes were intended for suspension of the vessel, though we are not told what kind of suspension could have been affected by perforations confined to one side'. He did, however, agree with the suggestions that cups may well have had some specialist function within funerary rites such as chafers or incense burners (1871, 372).

Greenwell, another prolific excavator and collector, also used the term 'Incense Cup' and noted many other key features of these vessels (Figure 1.2). In particular he commented on certain aspects of their manufacture and, whilst acknowledging fabric variation, concluded that they tended to be in a finer, better quality fabric than the 'Cinerary Urns' and he noted how their colour may vary according to firing conditions (Greenwell 1877, 78). A great observer of artefacts, Greenwell also noted that, in comparison to the larger vessels, cups are more frequently decorated on the base and he goes on to discuss at length the proposed functions of cups stating that 'none (of the explanations) can be regarded as altogether satisfactory' (1877, 81 our brackets) though he does incline towards the chafer hypothesis.

In 1886, Anderson discussed the Scottish cups and preferred to abandon the loaded 'Incense Cup' term in favour of 'cup-shaped vessels' or 'cup-shaped urns' (1886, 43). He noted the presence of a milk molar in the Biconical Cup from Wester Buckleyvie (FIFE/12) and concluded that the cup contained the cremated remains of an infant whilst the larger associated urn *probably* contained the ashes of the 'mother' (Anderson 1886, 45). In terms of use he concludes that 'this small variety of cup-shaped urn differs from those larger urns with which it is associated only in respect of the smallness of its size' (1886, 46) and goes on to state that 'where the contents of the smaller vessel have been determined they have been found to be the cremated bones of an infant' (1886, 47). This, as well as the observations of Greenwell, probably gave rise to the oft-quoted cup-child associations but it must be remembered, of course, that in the 19th Century few cremated remains were examined in detail and such palaeoanthropological studies were very much *ad hoc* and in their infancy. We now know that the cup-infant association is not so simplistic and that child burials, whether by cremation or inhumation, are also associated with full-sized Beakers (Clarke 1970), Food Vessels (Wilkin 2013) and Collared Urns (Longworth 1984).

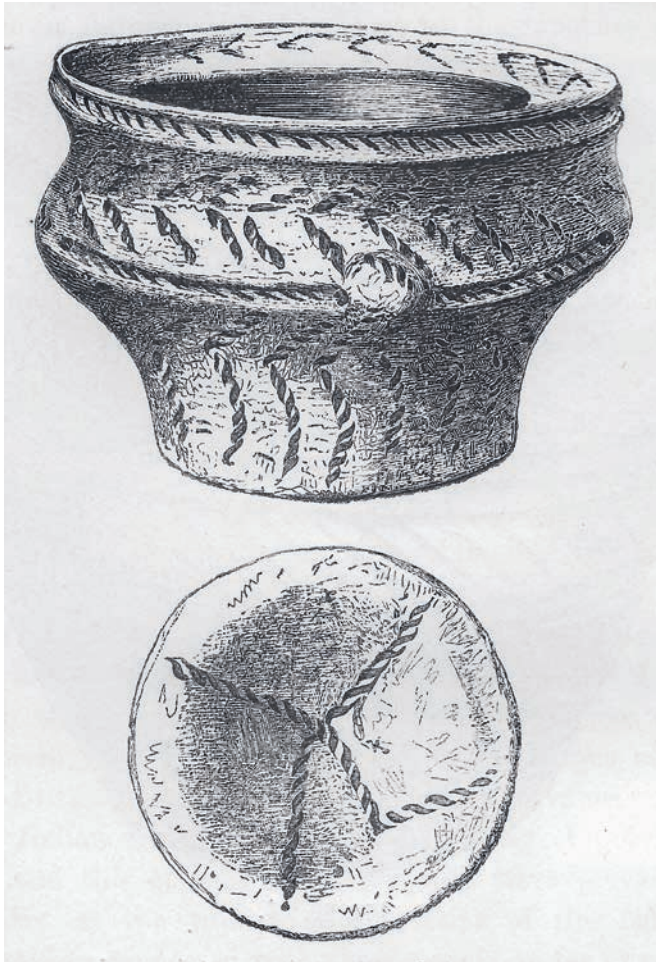


Figure 1.2 Greenwell's illustration of the Miniature Food Vessel from Hepple (NLAN/9). From Greenwell, 1877, 91, Fig. 79.

Mortimer, a contemporary and one-time rival of Greenwell, drew heavily on the information contained in Greenwell's Introduction in *British Barrows*, and reiterated Greenwell's observation that few of the cups were found with inhumations. Mortimer also suggested that some may have been burnt with the body on the funeral pyre (*contra* Greenwell 1877, 80 - who knew of only one instance) as they showed 'traces of intense heat, in fact, almost vitrified' (1905, lxi). He favoured the theory that the cups may have been used to carry kindling material to the funerary pyre, with the perforations acting as a means of supplying oxygen to the burning embers contained within the pot, although he acknowledged that this was irrelevant to those examples associated with inhumations (Mortimer 1905, lix-lxii).

Abercromby and after

Abercromby (1907) discussed the relative chronology of Bronze Age sepulchral pottery and, in his corpus of Bronze Age pottery (1912), he used photographs to illustrate his corpus and to convey the vast and remarkable range of the different ceramics in currency during the period (Figure 1.3). In doing so, he also demonstrated, for the first time, the variable condition of many of the individual pots, including the funerary cups. Abercromby may well have been the first to use the word 'pygmy' in relation to the cups though, as the quotation at the head of this chapter demonstrates, Fenton had already suggested that they may have been used by an ancient 'pygmy race' (1860, 33). Though Fenton was amongst the first to recognise the miniature nature of some "Ancient British" grave goods (pestle macehead beads, axes, halberd pendants), needless to say, his explanation for the observed phenomena was not well received and in Abercromby's case, the term was used purely to refer to their diminutive size (from the Greek *pygmaios* meaning dwarf - just as we have pygmy shrews and pygmy hippopotami). Abercromby saw this term as purely descriptive and used it in preference to the over-interpretative label 'Incense Cup' which, he thought, had 'nothing to recommend it' (1912, vol II, 24). Abercromby also attempted a classification which he used in his regional discussions. He devised seven separate categories of cup as follows:

1. Expanded or Pedestal cups
2. Grape or Nodulated or Mammillar cups
3. With perforated walls
4. Biconical with everted lip
5. Straight-sided, vertical or inclined
6. Biconical
7. Miscellaneous forms.



Figure 1.3 Abercromby's photographic illustration of cups. From Abercromby, 1912, Vol.II, Plate LXXXIII.

Type 7 basically encompassed fragmentary vessels and all those that did not appear to fit into his previous types. As well as considering regional variations, Abercromby also noted that the pots could be found with either cremation burials or inhumations, as well as adults and children.

Subsequent studies relating to funerary cups changed focus slightly, most notably with Piggott's seminal article on the Wessex culture in 1938 in which he attempted to seek continental origins for what he saw as 'exotic' vessels (i.e. funerary cups). Although he drew certain parallels between the distinctive Aldbourne Cups and ceramics of the French Chassey II culture based largely upon the use of ostensibly similar decorative techniques and motifs, Piggott recognised that there were major problems with a chronological framework that could link the funerary cups from Britain with what he saw as potentially continentally inspired sources. Gerloff (1975, 231) would later conclude that certain types of cup, particularly the fenestrated examples were a 'peculiarly British' phenomenon.

In 1951, Scott noted a particular concentration of cups in the south-west of Scotland, across the Biggar Gap to around the Tay Valley and possibly linking metalworking areas. Further evidence of contacts between different regions, connecting certain coastal sites and along some river valleys, was further demonstrated by Morrison (1968, 87 & 95). Scott also drew attention to the sharing of specific decorative elements, such as cruciform motifs, on the bases of some funerary cups from south-west Scotland and Ireland, such as the vessels from Dalry (D&G/8), Coulter (LANS/6), Drung (Co. Donegal) and Knockboy (Co. Antrim) (Kavanagh 1977, Nos.13 and 4).

The first post-Abercromby corpus of funerary cups from Wales was published by Savory in 1958, who came up with his own simplified typology based on the Welsh examples. This consisted of six groupings;

- A. Bipartite cups (such as that from Breach Farm, Glamorgan, GLAM/4)
- B. Open work cups (i.e. Fenestrated Cups such as the example from Bryn Seiont, GWYN/3)
- C. Globular or bipartite cups with foot-rings (Talbeny, Pembrokeshire, DYFED/16)
- D. Debased bipartite types (Cwm Cadlan, Penderyn, Brecknock, GLAM/1)
- E. Trunconic and globular cups (Ynys Hir, Llanfihangel Nant Bran, Brecknock, POWYS/5)
- F. Unclassifiable - mainly vessels reported but lost.

Savory (1958, 99) explored continental parallels for the cups and, following Scott (1951) compared the cruciform motifs decorating the base of some cups to those found on sheet gold discs from burials such as that at Mere in Wiltshire suggesting that these may have related to 'the sun symbolism of central and northern Europe'. He also argued that the paired perforations found on many cups could have had a ritual function more akin to 'oculi' linked with religious cults in the Mediterranean (Savory 1958, 90) as they appeared to have no other practical purpose.

Longworth appears to have been the first to fully abandon the terms 'Incense Cups' and 'Pygmy Cups' preferring, in 1961, to label them 'Accessory Vessels' (Longworth 1961, 276) and this term is still widely in use. The term is not favoured here, however, as larger vessels may also act as accessory vessels as, for example, in the case of double Food Vessel or urn burials. It may also

be argued that Beakers, Collared Urns and Food Vessels themselves are ‘accessory vessels’ in that they are ‘accessory’ to the burials. For this reason, we prefer the simple term ‘Cup’ as it at once denotes size yet has no functional connotations.

Building up a Corpus

In 1967, Longworth focussed on a particular type of funerary cup namely vessels that had a low squat form, wide flat bases and straight to convex sides which converged to closed mouths which he termed ‘Contracted Mouth Accessory Cups’ (Longworth 1967, 111). He believed that this group had a distribution focussing predominantly on north and west Yorkshire, extending in to parts of Lancashire, and often located along river valleys. Importantly, he hinted at a possible connection with earlier Beaker practices and commented on some shared decorative features, such as the use of zoning and geometric patterns. He also highlighted the link by the presence of some inhumation burials associated with cups, such as the burial at Barnham (SUFF/2) (Edwardson 1958, 186-190, Longworth 1967, 111-122). Clarke, in his corpus of Beaker pottery, also noted the use of certain Beaker motifs on some funerary cups, although could find ‘no real coherence of form or decoration, except in a few cases, (notably the) Aldbourn cups (1970, 272 our brackets).

Kavanagh’s 1977 study was the first of its kind to analyse the context of Irish cups at a national level. Whilst she found similar types of cups to those in Britain, almost all of the Irish examples were associated with cremated human remains and only one example of an Irish funerary cup, that from Drung (Co Donegal) was found with an inhumation. Ó Donnabháin and Brindley’s study of the human remains associated with Irish cups would demonstrate that as well as single individuals, there were instances of adults and children found together (1990, 23). In Ireland the most common forms found were biconical forms and they were restricted mainly to the north-east of Ireland (Kavanagh 1977, 64). Five examples of Fenestrated Cups were also recorded, three of which had unusual triangular perforations.

These rare and unusual cups have long been recognised as a feature of the assemblage from southern England in particular. Longworth (1983) however, felt they had a more widespread distribution, noting examples from Scotland, Wales and Ireland. He grouped Fenestrated Cups according to the shape of the ‘cut-outs’, and offering the following classification:

- A. cups with triangular and/or lozenge shaped perforations.
- B. cups with broad rectangular perforations.
- C. cups with broad oval perforations
- D. cups with round perforations greater than 10mm in diameter and
- E. cups with narrow vertical perforations.

The distribution maps suggested that ‘A’ type Fenestrated Cups had a distribution ‘peripheral to the Irish Sea’.

Longworth (1984) went on to published his own typology for funerary cups, based upon those associated with Collared Urns. His corpus of Collared Urns also provided outline illustrations of associated cups with details of their context and artefactual associations, however his

typology, in keeping with previous attempts, contained many types (once again illustrating the diversity of the tradition) and comprised twelve separate categories;

1. Grape cups
2. Perforated wall cups
3. Miniature Irish bowls
4. Collared cups
5. Contracted mouth cups
6. Cylindrical cups
7. Trunco-conic cups
8. Tub-shaped vessels
9. Bowl-shaped vessels
10. Bipartite vessels and
11. Thumb cups
12. Miscellaneous and fragmentary

More recent work

Allen and Hopkins' regional study of cups in Lincolnshire (2000) again highlighted the link between funerary cups, cremations and Food Vessels and they largely followed Longworth's typology. They noted the burnt interiors of some Lincolnshire cups suggesting that they were used as lamps or for burning 'some other substances' (2000, 307). Following the work of Sherratt (1991, 62), when discussing Fenestrated and Grape Cups, they suggested that they may have been used not for burning 'incense' but for 'drug-like substances' that may have played a part in rituals associated with the funeral. Needless to say, there is as yet no direct evidence for this practice. The multiple pot burial at Sudbrook was interpreted as a drinking set, again for funeral-related commensality rituals. The use of grog as an opening agent in many of the vessels may have linked them to the past and provided a means of ensuring continuity in potting practice and social cohesion though they admit that the use of grog is not exclusive and other inclusions are found in the fabrics of some. They suggest that the origins of the Lincolnshire cups could lie in the domestic organic record such as basketry, but again there is no direct evidence for this hypothesis.

Gibson's article (2004a) on Scottish cups was amongst the first to discuss a number of different aspects of the cups rather than just burial associations. He suggested (2004a, 271) that certain terms used as labels for the cups were inappropriate, for example, the term 'accessory' was often incorrectly used as 'not all vessels act in an accessory (i.e. extra or additional) capacity', neither was 'miniature' appropriate as not all cups 'manifest themselves in larger forms'. Two important observations were made in this article, the first of which was the fact that some cups have 'careless' or 'sloppy' decoration and the second was that a number exhibit signs of firing damage including catastrophic spalling (Gibson and Woods 1997, 156). Some are clearly firing 'wasters' yet were still deemed suitable for a burial context, suggesting perhaps that it was the role that the vessels played within the funerary ritual that was the key to understanding their purpose or meaning (Gibson 2004a: 283-284). Residue analysis carried out at the University of Bradford on a sample of 25 funerary cups proved inconclusive as to their use and contents (Gibson and Stern 2006)

Infra-red analysis of the vessel from Breach Farm (GLAM/4) by Davis (2006) suggested that some vessels may well have been deliberately coloured when originally made. Traces of red and white inlay, as well as a deliberately blackened surface, were noted on the Breach Farm cup and such uses of colour are becoming increasingly recognised on other examples (Gibson 2004a, 281; Copper 2017, 55).

Over-enthusiastic restoration in the past may also have disguised the fact that some cups may have been incomplete or highly fragmentary when deposited (Gibson 2004a, 284; Hallam 2015, 106-9; Copper 2017, 175). Indeed, reassessment of the cup from the grave assemblage associated with the burial at Clandon (DORS/6) (Needham and Woodward 2008) has suggested that there may have been a 'misinterpretation on the part of the restorer'. This error was first noticed in 1985 (Clarke, Cowie and Foxon 1985, 275) when the Clandon funerary cup was studied as part of the *Symbols of Power* exhibition at National Museums Scotland. Unfortunately, ceramics were beyond the remit of the recent extensive Leverhulme project on Early Bronze Age grave goods, although it was acknowledged that 'detailed study of this body of data in the future could be very illuminating' (Woodward and Hunter 2015, 558).

Jones (2013) also eschews the Incense Cup and Accessory Vessel labels but offers instead the term 'Miniature Cup' which he sees as being neutral and without bias of interpretation. We would argue that the word 'miniature' is unnecessary as the majority of these vessels are not smaller variants of larger vessels. The epithet might only be relevant to miniature Beakers, Urns and Food Vessels (our Group 1 – see Chapter 2) and, of course, such vessels comprise a minority of the corpus. Jones, relying on a small and regionally selective data-set, also sees these vessels as being hastily made 'witnessed by the fact that many of the perforations were made in wet clay' (2013, 368). In fact, nearly all the perforations have been made in wet clay as has the decoration. Decorating or piercing after the pots had reached the leather hard stage would almost certainly have resulted in damage: holes would have to be drilled and few if any demonstrate this phenomenon. Impressed decoration has to be done whilst the clay is wet otherwise impressions would be impossible to execute. The pots are indeed small and often pinched but what Jones forgets is that it usually takes much longer to decorate a pot than to form it and Grape Cups in particular are time-consuming items involving a great deal of effort in their manufacture. His claim that their small size references other ceramic traditions can only really be applied to our Group 1 vessels though the geometric decoration and decorative techniques employed on cups are comparable to those found on other Bronze Age ceramics.

Summary

Bronze Age funerary cups of various types have captured the interest (and imagination) of researchers since the birth of modern archaeology. As was usual in the days of the antiquarians, much of the discussion of these vessels was little more than conjecture even attributing them to a diminutive race. The majority of serious research, largely inaugurated by Colt Hoare and especially Greenwell, whose understanding of artefacts, particularly ceramics, was far ahead of his time, focused on their associations in the burial record. It was obvious from the days of Mortimer that not all were associated with cremations but that cups could also be associated with inhumation burials. Nor were they restricted to the burials of children, but that they accompanied burials of all ages. These pertinent early observations have often been overlooked by more recent authors and will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Studies since Abercromby have tended to concentrate on typology as was the current custom but each proposed typological scheme was complex and served only to highlight the great variation in form and decoration encountered amongst the cups rather than adding to our understanding of date and significance. National corpora have only been published for Wales, Ireland and Scotland but are now out of date whilst other studies are regional and therefore limited in scope. Nevertheless, their usefulness in compiling the present corpus is readily acknowledged.

Later studies have tended towards interpreting the functions of these vessels but focus on their use in pyro-ritual sepulchral activity has persisted with scant attention paid to other contexts. From chafers, to incense burners, to braziers for drug inhalation, these interpretations reflect their times and none can be supported by any evidence other than analogy and conjecture. As we hope to demonstrate later, there need be no catch-all interpretation for such a diverse range of ceramics.