

TWO BRONZE AGE URNS FROM PORTSDOWN

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ABSTRACT

During 1971-2 construction work on the M27 motorway revealed the remains of two Bronze Age urns on Portsdown. The first was found by members of the South Hampshire Archaeological Rescue Group (SHARG) walking the route and the second, an inverted urn containing a cremation burial, was uncovered by a machine removing chalk. The rescue of the latter urn was made possible by the vigilance of the machine operator, Mr Ken Shapely, whose prompt reporting of the urn to the writer and his assistance in its subsequent removal was greatly appreciated. Both vessels had suffered considerable damage but enough remained of the second one to allow a reconstruction. The excavations were undertaken by members of SHARG on behalf of the Department of the Environment and all the material recovered from the burials together with the relevant documents have been placed in the Portsmouth City Museum.

THE SITE

Portsdown is some 11km long, running east-west to overlook the upper reaches of Portsmouth and Langstone Harbours. Both burials were on the south face of the down at 55m above OSD, the first at NGR SU 609 066, the second at NGR SU 604 067 (see Fig 1).

Earlier roadworks 4km to the east at the junction of the A333 and the Military Road along Portsdown had led to the discovery of a Bronze Age Wessex type cremation with secondary burials and a Saxon cemetery (Corney *et al* 1969) and also a late Wessex inhumation (Rudkin forthcoming). Records show that a number of burial mounds existed on Portsdown (Grinsell 1939, 361) but no traces of these remain today.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FEATURES

Urn No. 1

This was found in May 1971, the topsoil

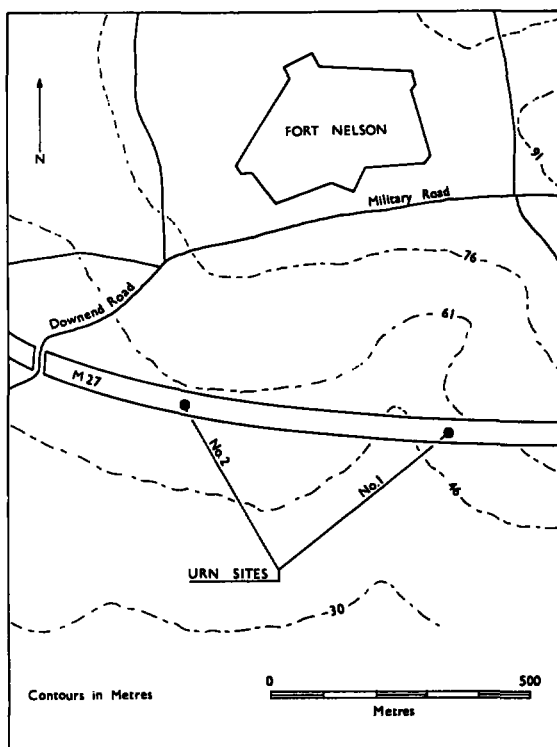


Fig 1. Location map.

having been removed some months earlier and subsequent weathering revealed a small patch of burnt flints. These, together with some charcoal, proved to be the remains of the fill of an urn which had been buried upright in a pit c 43cm diameter. The whole of the upper part was missing and was probably destroyed by ploughing long before the top soil was removed. A search of the surrounding area revealed no trace of a barrow or any other feature that could be associated with the burial.

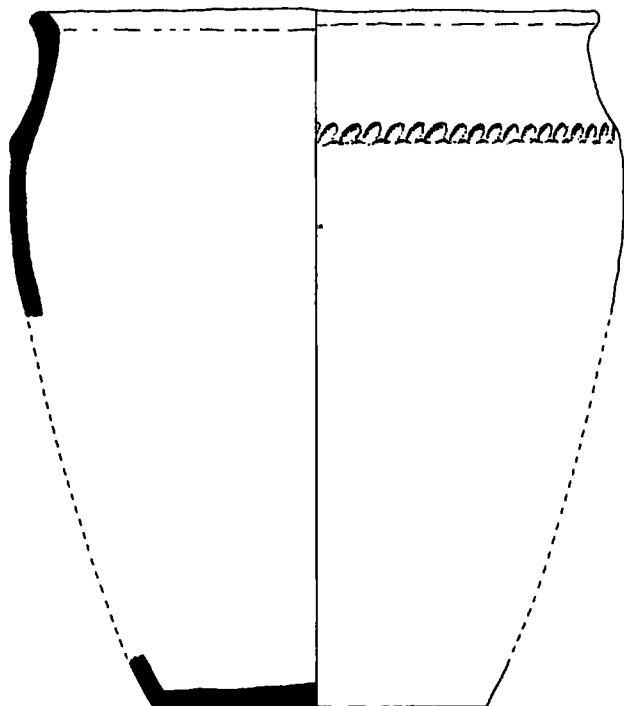


Fig 2. Urn No. 2. Scale 1:4.

Urn No. 2

Here again the top soil had been stripped some time previously but field work in the area had drawn a blank until in May 1972 a machine engaged in the removal of the underlying chalk uncovered a patch of dark soil. A closer examination showed it to be an inverted urn burial in a pit 36–38cm diameter and plough damage was again evident. Due to the activity of machines in the vicinity it was decided to remove the urn immediately within a matrix of the natural chalk to enable further examination under more favourable conditions. A search of the area showed no signs of associated features but a number of fragments of the burial which had been scattered when struck by the machine were recovered. The pit fill around the urn was a mixture of soil and broken chalk with a few small flints. It continued as a thin layer 10–15mm thick across the pit bottom, being noticeably lighter in colour than the fill of the urn itself.

DESCRIPTION OF THE POTTERY

Urn No. 1

Very little remained of this vessel. When uncovered the fabric was soft and the form distorted but the base appears to have been c 19cm diameter. The colour varies from red-brown to black and is tempered with crushed calcined flint, having grit size from dust to 8mm with 1–4mm predominant.

Urn No. 2 (Fig 2)

Height 37cm (reconstructed)

Rim diameter 29.5–30.5cm

Cordon diameter 33cm

Base diameter 18cm (reconstructed)

A barrel urn in red-brown fabric with slight traces of blackening. Crushed calcined flint tempered, grit size from dust to 4mm with 0.4mm to 2.5mm predominant. It has an expanded rim with a rounded internal bevel and the wall thickness varies from 8mm just below the cordon to 12mm at the centre of the base. The lower part of the urn was missing when excavated but up to 16cm of the profile below the rim and the majority of the rim and cordon survived. A number of sherds from the base and a short length of the base angle were found inside the urn. Smoothing marks are present on the inside of the urn body, the base, and around the internal and external faces of the rim. The sharp definition and close pitch (8–12mm) of the cordon impressions suggests that these were produced with a tool rather than a finger tip.

This is a simple form of barrel urn without the vertical ribs or neck cordon possessed by many of this type but still retaining the convex body, slightly concave neck and rim profile which are the main distinguishing features of barrel urns (Calkin 1962, 19).

The form and fabric suggest a Late Bronze Age context but isolated finds of cinerary urns have always been difficult to date and the re-assessment of Bronze Age chronology that has taken place over the past two decades (and still continues) has done little to ease the problem.

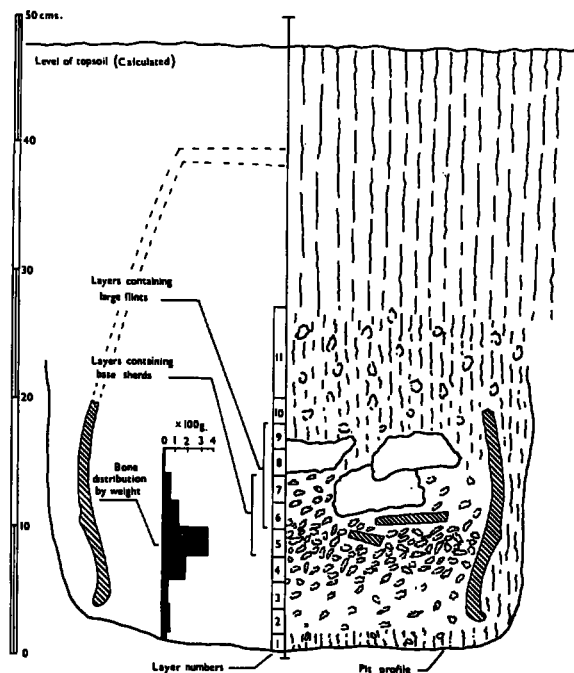


Fig 3. Urn No. 2. Section showing distribution of contents.

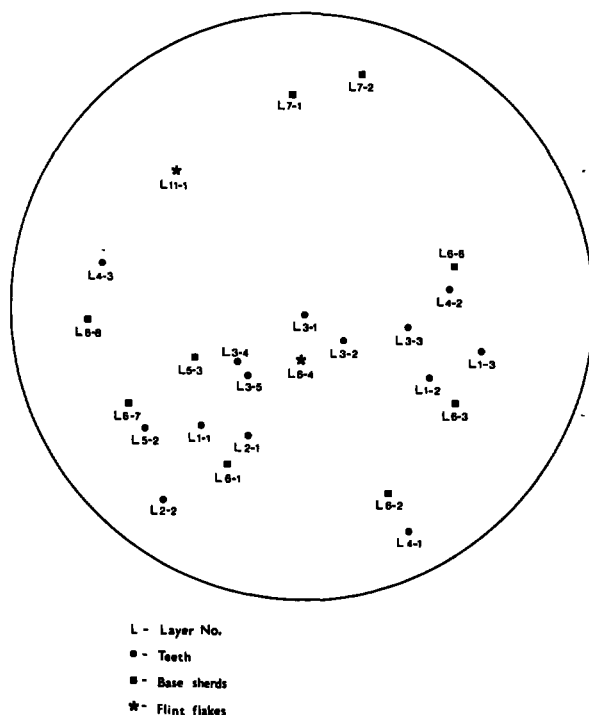


Fig 4. Urn No. 2. Plan view of numbered items. Scale 1:4.

THE URN CONTENTS

Urn No. 1

The flints and charcoal that revealed the position of this urn were all that was left of the fill. There were thirteen flints ranging in size from 3–8cm. All showed signs of burning.

Urn No. 2

The original fill occupied the lower 11–12cm of the urn and consisted of a compact mass of fragmented calcined bone, soil, chalk rubble, sherds of the urn base and flints of varying sizes (Fig 3). To enable the distribution of the contents to be plotted they were removed in eleven layers, ten of approximately 2cm and one (the uppermost) of 7cm thickness. With the exception of the largest flints, material on the layer boundaries was allocated to the layer that contained the major portion. Individual items of interest, (e.g. teeth, potsherds) were numbered and also plotted in a plan view (Fig 4). The fill from each

layer was washed, sorted and weighed into the following categories:-

- (i) Bone
- (ii) Teeth
- (iii) Pottery
- (iv) Soil
- (v) Fine fill (other than soil), up to 3mm in size and consisting mainly of chalk and flint but with some small bone fragments
- (vi) Coarse fill, 4–40mm in size and consisting entirely of chalk and flint
- (vii) Flint flakes

Table 1 lists the contents of each layer, excluding base sherds and large flints found in layers 5–9. One lump of fill of approximately 1000g from layers 10, 11 was also kept intact.

Table 1. Urn No. 2 contents. Figures in parentheses refer to Fig 4.

CONTENTS	LAYER 1	LAYER 2	LAYER 3	LAYER 4	LAYER 5
BONE	50g	70g	60g	210g	360g
TEETH	(1)Root (2)Root (3)Root	(1)Root (2)Crown	(1)Root (2)Root (3)Root (4)Root (5)Root	(1)Crown (2)Root (3)5 frag- ments	(2)Root
POTTERY	—	—	—	—	(3)3 base sherds
SOIL	1025g	640g	485g	325g	515g
FINE FILL	85g	50g	70g	55g	100g
COARSE FILL	490g	240g	270g	235g	135g
FLINT FLAKES	—	—	—	—	—
TOTAL	1650g	1000g	885g	825g	1110g

CONTENTS	LAYER 6	LAYER 7	LAYER 8	LAYER 9	LAYERS 10,11
BONE	135g	60g	10g	—	—
TEETH	—	—	—	—	—
POTTERY	(1)Base sherd (2)Base sherd (3)Base sherd (6)4 base sherds (7)2 base sherds (8)4 base sherds	(1)3 base sherds (2)3 base sherds	—	—	—
POTTERY CRUMBS	25g	15g	35g	40g	30g
SOIL	435g	720g	1160g	910g	3190g
FINE FILL	50g	40g	60g	55g	215g
COARSE FILL	110g	135g	235g	170g	1035g
FLINT FLAKES	(4)20 x 5mm	—	—	—	(1)65 x 35 mm
TOTAL	755g	970g	1500g	1175g	4470g

General Observations on the Fill of Urn No. 2

The calcined bone was concentrated in layers 4, 5 and 6. Layers 1, 2 and 3 contained very little bone, although surprisingly these three layers yielded the majority of the teeth fragments.

The base sherds were confined to layers 5 to 7, and alongside and above these in layers 6 to 9 were nine large flints ranging from 7–12cm in length, eight of which have the characteristics of surface flints. These flints formed a horizon between the cremation with its associated debris and the fill of layers 10 and 11, which was a conglomerate of broken chalk, soil, small flints and crumbled urn fabric. Above this level there had been an estimated 20cm of plough soil.

Some of the small flints in layers 3 and 4 had been subjected to heating resulting in 'pot boiler' type crazing.

A number of small snail shells, 1–6mm in size, were found in each of the lower eight layers. These are the same layers in which bone was present, but it is difficult to say how much emphasis should be placed on this point as the effects of worm action must be taken into account. Due to the extensive surface stripping it was not possible to obtain a sample of shells for comparison from within a reasonable distance of the burial.

Root penetration was noted as far down as layer 5.

The Cremation

The total weight of the cremated bone is 1190g of which 135g was recovered from the material scattered by the mechanical excavator. The fragments range in size from dust to 60mm but few exceed 30mm and the majority are much less, probably due to deliberate pounding after burning. All are heavily calcined, brittle and white in colour with some fissuring and distortion. With the exception of the teeth the remains were not submitted for expert examination.

The Dental Evidence by John French

A total of sixteen tooth fragments were examined. As far as could be determined these represented:-

- (a) Maxillary Teeth: One central incisor, one lateral incisor, one canine, one premolar and two, or possibly three, molars.
- (b) Mandibular Teeth: One incisor and one premolar.

Accurate identification of these teeth was difficult,

because as in most cases of cremation, almost all the enamel had burned away except for a little remaining cervically in some instances. It was therefore necessary to rely on the shape of any coronal dentine present and on root morphology.

Estimation of Age:

1. All apices of roots examined were closed.
2. X-rays showed a narrowing of the root canals, probably due to secondary dentine formation.
3. The apices of a multi-rooted tooth showed marked exostosis. This in itself is no sure indication of age as various factors can cause this condition; however taken in conjunction with 1 and 2 it can be said with reasonable certainty that the remains are those of a mature adult. There was no dental evidence to indicate that more than one individual was represented.

The Mollusca by Stan Hackman

Species and quantity:-

<i>Goniodiscus rotundatus</i> (Müller)	88
<i>Vallonia exentrica</i> (Sterki)	30
<i>Retinella pura</i> (Alder)	7
<i>Pupilla muscorum</i> (Linné)	7
<i>Collumella edentula</i> (Draparnaud)	4
<i>Cochlicopa lubrica</i> (Müller)	3
<i>Retinella radiatula</i> (Alder)	3
<i>Vittrina pellucida</i> (Müller)	3
<i>Caecilioides acicula</i> (Müller)	1
<i>Balea perversa</i> (Linne)	1
<i>Clausilia bidentata</i> (Ström)	1

A total of 148, together with a number of uncertain fragments. A mixed collection of both shade preferring species (mainly *Goniodiscus rotundatus*, at 60% of the total) and open country species (mainly *Vallonia* at 22%) with a clear predominance of the former. Both of these types are quite commonly found.

It would seem that this collection has been well worm sorted and probably bears no relation to any stratigraphy in the locality, which normally requires to be investigated, and from which a number of soil samples must be taken before any serious attempt at molluscan/environmental analysis can be made.

A proportion of the shells examined are probably of fairly recent origin and the collection altogether could suggest a site having at some time a degree of cover such as scrub or certainly thick grass with its tangled and damp-retaining matted base and root system. It should be said that some of the identifications are uncertain, but it is not thought likely that the general conclusions would be affected in this case.

CONCLUSIONS

The advanced state of deterioration of the first urn and the small amount of surviving pottery gives little scope for comment other than to point out the similarities of its colour, fabric and base diameter to those of the second urn. In the absence of any human remains it is impossible to say if this was a cremation burial, for although the presence of charcoal would tend to suggest that it was, domestic pots of the Middle Bronze Age were found buried whole and upright in pits both at Wrecclesham, Surrey (Lowther 1939), where at least one pot contained burnt flints, and at Durrington Walls in Wiltshire (Stone, Piggott & Booth 1954).

The second urn and the cremation it held survived to a greater extent by virtue of its burial in a deeper pit which had been partially cut into the natural chalk; even so it is doubtful if the base was originally much below

ground level. Pressure from above had caused the base to collapse into the void above the cremation and it was accompanied by a number of the flints responsible for the pressure – these probably came from a cairn which formed the core of a burial mound. This is a recognised type of barrow construction and one of those listed for some of the Dorset barrows (Grinsell 1959). Equally well known is its effect on any urns buried underneath and an example of this from Wiltshire is Barrow BC 1 at Knighton Hill (Rahtz 1970) where although the mound still survived, the central cairn had caused the base of an underlying barrel urn to collapse in almost identical fashion.

If, as seems likely, the Portsdown cremation was also the site of a barrow then no record exists to confirm this, and it was probably destroyed either in antiquity by agricultural activity or in the 19th century by military works.

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