

An Anglo-Saxon Urn (probably 5th century AD)



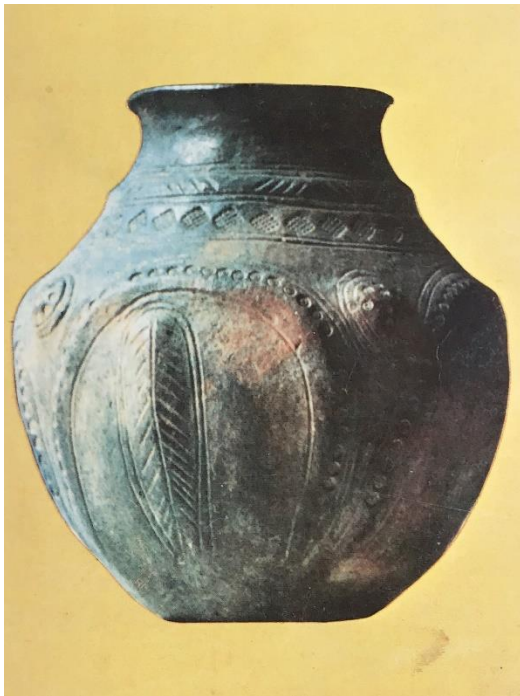
When the Romans left Britain for good shortly after 400 AD advanced pottery technology such as the wheel and kilns was lost to Britain for several centuries. For most of the Anglo-Saxon period all pottery was hand-built, like the urn in this picture. This pot was found in Norfolk in the 1960s, presumably dug out of the ground as burial is the only way such pottery has survived to the present day.

Until around 600 AD the Anglo-Saxons cremated most of their dead and most such pots have been found at cremation sites. Although this urn is a bit small (14 cm tall) it was probably a cremation urn. For quite a long time it was thought that such urns were made specifically for cremation use, but relatively recent research into pots with constricted necks like this one has found pitting and erosion of the surface inside most of them, which suggest that they had previously been used for the production and consumption of beer. Pots with wider necks have been found with soot marks on the outside, suggesting that those were used for cooking. It looks as if when someone died the family selected a favoured pot from the home for use in the burial. Given the shape and small size of my pot, it might have been used for drinking beer, possibly handed round a group in communal drinking.

This pot was almost certainly coiled. I can see marks running around the pot on the inside which could be remnants of the coiling process, but as the pot may have been a cremation urn I am a bit queasy about putting my hand inside to feel the surface. The outer surface has a

random network of fine light-coloured ridges, which I believe is limescale which has built up where there was contact with plant roots during its burial. The East Anglian soil is often chalky, as anyone who has visited Grimes Graves will know. When I first got this pot I did think about cleaning off these marks with a descaling solution, but in the end I felt that they are part of the pot's history and deserve to stay there. As an archaeologist said to me recently, about a different pot – 'it's all part of the object's biography'.

Despite the limescale marks and the general wear it is possible to see several things of interest on the surface of the urn. There are clear burnishing marks covering the whole pot – running vertically above the shoulder and horizontally on the lower half. In some areas there is also evidence of three parallel grooves on the shoulder (see the right side of the photo). This sort of decoration, and parallel grooves on the shoulder in particular, was common on such urns. Some Anglo-Saxon urns had much more elaborate decoration, with complex patterns of grooves, stamps and raised bosses covering much of the pot (see the photo below, taken from the book on Anglo-Saxon pottery by Kennett).



As can be seen in the photo of my pot, it has areas which are dark brown, almost black, and others which are a lighter brown, reflecting the passage of the flames and the smoke around the pot during the firing. Kiln firing did not return to Britain until the seventh century so this urn will have been fired in a bonfire or clamp (basically a heap of pottery and fuel).

It is impossible to know exactly when this urn was made, but it was very probably made before 600 AD, because after that date most bodies were buried rather than cremated and so not many later pots have been found. The particular shape and decoration of this pot is similar to ones found in Frisia (a coastal region on the North Sea, in an area where the Netherlands/Germany border is now). The Frisians invaded East Anglia in the fifth century

AD and the similarity to urns from the homeland suggests that this may be an early pot, made before the British Frisians started to develop their own styles.

When I bought this pot at an auction I was told that it came from the Tregear collection, which had been built up over the period 1985 to 2006. I have no further information, but it is tempting to think that this collector was Mary Tregear, the eminent scholar of Chinese ceramics and Keeper of Eastern Art at the Ashmolean Museum from 1987 to 1991. Mary Tregear died in 2010, which seems consistent with stopping collecting in 2006. I have two books by Mary Tregear, including an impressive survey of Chinese Song dynasty ceramics. It is interesting to think that she may have had an interest in Anglo-Saxon pottery as well.

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