REPORT ON THE CONSERVATION OF TWO PREHISTORIC POTS FROM HAUXLEY/DRURIDGE BAY, NORTHUMBERLAND

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QUANTIFICATION

Two pots, since excavation in the care of Tyne & Wear Museums Service and Northumberland County Council, were received for cleaning, consolidation and repair.

DESCRIPTION

Beaker 1 (from the inhumation)

A vessel 15. 1 cm high, 13.4cm diameter at the rim, and 8.7cm diameter at the base. The fabric is 0.80cm thick at the rim. The fabric is a variable red/brown/buff colour on the outside, and a less variable brown/grey on the inside. Grit has been used as a filler, and this is particularly evident on the inside of the vessel. The pot has a rounded shoulder carination and the top 4cm are slightly everted. The base is flat.

There is irregular zonal decoration over the upper two thirds of the pot surface. This is in the form of twisted cord impressions laid in lines around the vessel and in chevron patterns. The lower third of the outer surface is undecorated.

The base and the lower 4 -5 cm of the pot had become detached, and small fragments had broken away from the pot surface around the break. There are also several cracks running down from the rim, some of which penetrate through the thickness of the fabric.

Black carbonised material is finely splattered on the inside and outside of the vessel.

Beaker 2

The pot is 17.7cm high, 12. 1 cm diameter at the rim, and 8.8cm diameter at the base. The fabric is 0.86cm thick at the rim. This vessel is taller and less carinated than Beaker 1. The rim is slightly everted, and the base is flat.

This fabric is very similar to that used for Beaker 1, both in colour and in the grit used as a filler. These grits are again particularly evident on the inside of the vessel, and some of them are quite large (up to 0.4cm long).

There are bands of decoration on the outside to within 2cm of the vessel base. Lines of impressed cord circle the pot, and short lengths of impressed cord are arranged in diagonal lines and ?chevrons/crosses. The decoration is in general less sharply executed than on Beaker 1.

There is very finely splattered black carbonised material over the outer surface only.

There are areas of cracking around the base which are quite extensive, but do not penetrate the fabric thickness. One large and a few small cracks run down from the vessel rim.

At one point on the outer surface, around 4cm up from the base, there is a roughly circular area (c 3cm+ diameter) which is a darker red colour and has a different texture to the surrounding fabric. This could be where the vessel has been touching another during the firing process or where it has been in close contact or adhering to something in the burial environment.

CONSERVATION

Despite Beaker 1 being broken, both vessels are quite well-fired and in good condition. When received, all surfaces were uniformly covered with a dense, fine sandy silt, with plant rootlets present over some areas. The vessels were both empty save for a few crumbs of earth.

After examination of the surfaces to assess their condition, the vessels were dampened with a water spray to soften the dirt, and then washed using tap water and soft brushes to remove the silt. Experiments with swabs of wet cotton wool did not cause any colour loss from the surface of the fabric, so it was felt that it was safe to wash the pots using brushes. After washing inside and out, they were allowed to air dry.

Although fairly well-fired, the number of cracks in the pot fabric are a cause of concern, and it was felt that consolidation would help to halt the potential progress of the cracking. A consolidant, Paraloid B72, (an acrylic copolymer) was applied with a brush. This was used at 10%, dissolved in acetone/toluene. A little matting agent was used to lessen the shine. Two coats were applied, inside and out, the pots being allowed to air-dry between coats. After consolidation, the base of Beaker 1 was re-attached, using Paraloid B72 adhesive. Some of the tiny flakes which had come loose from the surface around the break were also reattached.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of the carbonised ?food remains, finely splattered over the pots' surfaces was considered. Current methods, using gas chromatography and mass spectroscopy are effective in distinguishing between meat, dairy and some vegetable lipids. However, the analysis is destructive and ideally requires 3 sherds (base, body and rim) from each pot for accurate testing. It was thought that intact vessels such as these were not suitable.

STORAGE

The pots were received well-packed in polythene boxes of adequate size, protected with polythene bubble pack and acid-free tissue. The conserved vessels were re-packed into these boxes.

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