

Introduction

A moderate assemblage of prehistoric pottery was recovered from informative trenching and a subsequent, small excavation near Quidenham, Norfolk. The pottery was recorded for archive and included in a finds report (Gifford 2023) for integration into the overall project report (Serrano, 2023): factual information about the assemblage used here derives from that archive. The recording methodology is described in the original report (Gifford 2023), and follows Prehistoric Ceramics Research Group guidance (2010) to ensure the utility of the data for synthesis. Recording was undertaken at the ‘appraisal’ level, as set out by ClfA’s Toolkit for Specialist Recording (2021).

This paper will expand on the contextualisation of the data begun in the original report (Gifford 2023), within the contexts of existing research frameworks. Though the project’s Written Scheme of Investigation (Boulter 2023, p.5) cited East Anglian research frameworks (Medlycott 2011; RF 2022) for consultation as work progressed, this paper will consider the results of the pottery investigation in reference to the thematic framework established by the PCRG (2016) – in particular, with reference to Themes A, “Archaeological Deposits and Assemblages of Finds”, and B, “Chronology”. In doing so, it will in large part follow the chrono-typological scheme set out by Brudenell for the later prehistoric period in East Anglia (2012; 2011).

The Assemblage in Context

A detailed characterisation of the assemblage by fabric, form, surface treatment and decoration is available in the original report and should not be repeated here. In summary, the assemblage includes 359 sherds, weighing a total of 2592g, of Early Iron Age pottery in

the Post-Deverel Rimbury tradition (Barrett 1978, p. 268-274; Barrett 1980; Cunliffe 2005; Brudenell 2012). The pottery was recovered through hand excavation and bulk sampling of deposits within a small group of five pits, close to an undated curvilinear feature probably from the same period (Serrano 2023). Two of the pits also contained a very small quantity of possibly residual worked flint flakes (Somerville 2023); however, the good condition of the sherds, and the continuity of fabrics throughout the assemblage both suggest close contemporaneity within the stratified groups, with no apparent residual ceramic element. The remains of several vessels are sufficient to classify forms with varying specificity, including coarseware jars, bowls, and fineware bowls/cups. The assemblage as a whole has been typologically dated to the Early Iron Age, with a tentative suggestion that it may date to the later part of the period, 600-350BC; this is suggested on the grounds of a number of formal and decorative traits associated with the 'Mature' Decorated phase of Post-Deverel Rimbury pottery in East Anglia (Gifford 2023, following Brudenell 2011; 2012).

While this is not an especially large assemblage, it should be noted that large assemblages of Early Iron Age pottery are particularly rare in Norfolk: since the large assemblage at West Harling (Clark and Fell 1953), only a handful of sites such as Trowse (Ashwin and Bates 2000), Pheasant's Walk (NHER 44609) and Little Melton (NHER 50209) have produced assemblages of more than a thousand sherds. In the past 15 years, a number of smaller Earlier Iron Age sites have been published as part of the Bacton to King's Lynn Gas Pipeline project (Wilson et al., 2012). Indeed, the significance of smaller assemblages like this one, is slightly amplified in the paucity of wider data (especially since few of the larger assemblages excavated in recent decades have been published.)

Theme A: Archaeological Deposits and Assemblages of Finds

Irregular scatters of sub-oval or sub-circular pits with simple fill sequences, containing broadly similar fragmentary ceramic assemblages are a well-documented phenomenon in the period of the earlier Iron Age in Norfolk, as at Bittering Quarry (Site 13023, Ashwin and Flitcroft 1999), Trowse (Ashwin and Bates, 2000), Antingham (Cater and Wilson, 2012a), Oulton (Cater and Wilson, 2012b), Weasenham Clumps (Wilson and Cater, 2012), and Foulsham (Clay and Wilson, 2012), to name but a few. These pits may be associated with a settlement (e.g. as at Oulton), but are also found in relative isolation (rather, where settlement remains have not been found). Pottery within the pits is typically fragmentary, with no fully reconstructable vessels, and this is often interpreted as indicating the material was primarily disposed of in some other context, such as a waste-heap, and later enters the pits as a secondary deposition (e.g. Percival 2000; 2012a; 2012b). Nonetheless, our understanding of the processes leading to this depositional pattern remains poorly defined (Percival 2012c, p.80; 2012b, p.71-2). In this context, the assemblage at Quidenham has some minor scope to contribute to synthetic research on *Theme A: Archaeological Deposits and Finds Assemblages* (PCRG 2016, p.3-4), and in particular topics 1, 2 and 3, concerning the condition of pottery in various kinds of deposits, processes of redeposition, and what deductions can be made from refuse deposits.

Though pits of this kind are often lumped together, variation does exist both within and between sites, and the Quidenham assemblage can be seen to deviate from others in a number of ways. Brudenell has argued for the importance of interrogating possible patterning in assemblage variability in Early Iron Age pottery (2012, p.271-274), though his

focus is on inherent attributes of the pottery forms represented. However, external attributes such as the size of assemblages within features, the condition of the sherds, associated finds, and fill sequences might be treated similarly.

For instance, if we compare the largest concentration of pot within a single pit at Quidenham, comprising 296 sherds, we see that it is comparable with the largest group from a pit at Oulton (309 sherds; Percival 2012c, p.71), or the two 'exceptionally large' groups from such pits at Trowse (345 and 283 sherds; Percival 2000, p. 171). This is despite Oulton and Trowse both having closely associated settlement activity, and overall much larger assemblages (818 and 2208 sherds, respectively), while the Quidenham excavation and trenching was not suggestive of a broader settlement context (Serrano 2023). Similarly, all three sites show distinctly unequal sherd distribution between pits of this type, with the vast majority of pits producing much smaller groups of sherds. This hint at stability in the range and pattern of assemblage sizes despite varying distance/accessibility from static areas of high consumption and waste production, might hint at different modes of waste production, or a complex relationship between the mode of waste-production and its eventual deposition; further research on the topic may approach the question of what we can begin to deduce from refuse deposits.

A further point of comparison is the recorded condition of sherds found within these deposits. A heightened level of abrasion on sherds is generally taken to evidence a period of pre-burial exposure – for instance, at Beeston with Bittering, the large assemblage from 24 similar pits was described as “most fragmentary and abraded” (Ashwin and Flitcroft 1999, p.225), and at Antingham the condition of the assemblage is described as “poor”, to the

extent that forms were “generally unclassifiable” (Percival 2012b, p. 71-2). At Oulton, however, the assemblages include a mixture of “small and abraded” material with “reasonably large and fresh” sherds (Percival 2012c, p.78). At Quidenham, by contrast, the sherds, though fragmented, were almost entirely unabraded (Gifford 2023), and not particularly suggestive of any extended period of exposure. Interestingly, however, average sherd weight for both the Oulton and Antingham assemblages was larger (10g and 9.2g respectively; Percival 2012c; 2012b) than at Quidenham, which was just over 7g. However, this metric can be misleading, as it does not account for the representation of thicker, heavier fabrics. This condition comparison can be extended to contexts, too: pits at Oulton show a mixture of fill sequences, with some apparently opened long enough in advance of being backfilled with waste to silt up at the base, or left half full (Cater and Wilson 2012, p.76-77), while all the pits producing finds at Quidenham were filled by single deposits. These variances between sites would seem to indicate deviations in the supposed process of redeposition, which might be expanded upon with further research.

Theme B: Chronology

The period to which the Quidenham assemblage belongs certainly represents a regional chronology in need of improved understanding, as suggested by the research framework (PCRG 2015, Theme B Topic 1). The chronology of the Early Iron Age is generally frustrated by the imprecision of radiocarbon dating for the period, due to the much-maligned ‘Halstatt’ plateau in the calibration curve, from 800-400BC (Cunliffe 2005, p.652-4; Hamilton, Haselgrove and Gosden 2015). It has long been noted that difficulties of Iron Age sequencing are particularly exacerbated in Northern East Anglia (Percival 2000, p.177-9; Medlycott 2011,

p.30; Brudenell 2011, p.17): the most fundamental reason for this is the relatively low number of clearly stratified sequences from large assemblages from the area, as mentioned above. Despite improvements in measurement precision in recent years allowing for more differentiated results within this period (ibid, p. 3), the effect is compounded by widespread reluctance to invest resources in radiocarbon dates which may not directly help a project.

While other areas have benefitted from the increased use of Bayesian modelling to improve the utility of radiocarbon dates, broad studies such as that by Hamilton, Haselgrove and Gosden (2015) have tended to exclude Norfolk and East Anglia, likely for this reason.

As such, most Norfolk investigations with ceramics rely on typological dating (cf. Percival 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2000; 1999). However, the region's historically poor data representation in synthetic typological sequencing projects may mean that even regionalised categories such as Cunliffe's style-zones for East Anglia (2005) are potentially out-of-step with the Norfolk evidence (Brudenell 2012, p.24; Knight 2002, p. 127). Brudenell's reassessment of the evidence in *Pots, Practice and Society* (2012) has helped to refine typological understanding, but how type-groups map to chronology remains indistinct (Brudenell 2011; Knight 2002, p.127; cf. Hamilton, Haselgrove and Gosden, 2015), and this effect is felt most keenly in the later part of the Early Iron Age and transition to Middle Iron Age (Knight 2002, p.127; Medlycott 2011, p.29). The identification of sequences for scientific dating, and the investigation of chronological implications of specific forms/types are of primary importance for consolidating the chronological framework, as set out in PCRG's *Theme B: Topics 3 and 5* (2016): it is in this regard that the Quidenham assemblage has some small potential to contribute.

Though the pit scatter does not offer a long series of sequential deposits for developing a chronological model, the pottery appears from fabric and condition analysis to constitute a fairly homogenous group of closely related units, allowing for reasonable extrapolation of interpretation within the assemblage – and this has the potential to be better established if time can be spent attempting to cross-fit sherds from separate deposits. Since the assemblage does include a good proportion of diagnostic typological material, with distinctive, identifiable forms, decorative techniques such a grouping might be used to test the limitations of currently understood style-groups, especially since there are notable similarities with both the Harling-type and Darmsden-Linton groups (cf. Cunliffe 2005; Brudenell, 2011). This avenue holds some promise since the assemblage appears to include two distinctive types identified as diagnostic of the later Early Iron Age, ‘mature’ Decorated Phase style: a sinuous-necked jar, often with an internally flanged rim, and a jar with fingernail rustication below the shoulder (2011, p.20-21). A distinctive rim of the former type, and several sherds possibly relating to the second type, are present in the Quidenham assemblage, contributing in part to the suggestion of a possible 600-350BC date. Parallels for the former have been identified at Erpingham (illustrated in Brudenell 2011, fig 6.5), Bittering Quarry (Ashwin and Flitcroft 1999, 243 fig. 22 P31) as well as at Linton, Cambridgeshire (Fell 1953, 35, fig, 3 P9). Though the Bittering Quarry assemblage was originally dated to the 3-1st century BC (Percival 1999, p. 248), Brudenell’s revision includes it in his group of later Early Iron Age assemblages, 600/500-350BC (2011). The fingernail-rusticated sherds are best compared with examples from Stanford (Birks and Robertson 2005, 691. Fig 11H) and Bittering Quarry (Ashwin and Flitcroft 1999, 244 , fig.23); indeed, it has been suggested that groups associated with this distinctive type found in Norfolk (and

rarely elsewhere) might signal an unidentified, distinct regional style group (Brudenell 2011, p.21); the Quidenham assemblage, therefore, could contribute to the study of such a possibility, alongside larger assemblages from Stanford (Birks and Robertson 2005) and Feltwell (Shand 1985).

Furthermore, though this small assemblage is far from an ideal candidate for Bayesian analysis, which is among the clearest priorities of the PCRG research agenda (2016), there is some potential in this assemblage to associate these types with a radiocarbon date; a cereal grain was recovered from bulk sampling of the pit deposit containing the largest proportion of the pottery. Naturally, this is not as securely related to the date of the pottery's use as an adherent burnt residue on a sherd would be: the cereal grain may be residual, as has been assumed of the worked flint in the same deposit (Somervill, 2023). Despite the lack of a wider sequence, given the scarcity of radiocarbon dates on published Early Iron Age material from the region, even a small assemblage that is well-related and sufficiently diagnostic is arguably worth pursuing a date for, in service of anchoring the typological framework.

(Word Count: 2188)

Student: Ciar Gifford
Student No: 2318131

Module: HPAR7004
Course: MA18-PTPA7MA-APR

Assignment 3
Date: 18/Jan/2024
Word Count: 2188

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