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# Potted histories: cremation, ceramics and social memory in early Roman Britain,

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HOWARD WILLIAMS

## POTTED HISTORIES – CREMATION, CERAMICS AND SOCIAL MEMORY IN EARLY ROMAN BRITAIN

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*Summary. Archaeologists have identified the adoption of new forms of cremation ritual during the early Roman period in south-east Britain. Cremation may have been widely used by communities in the Iron Age, but the distinctive nature of these new rites was their frequent placing of the dead within, and associated with, ceramic vessels. This paper suggests an interpretation for the social meaning of these cremation burial rites that involved the burial of ashes with and within pots as a means of commemoration. In this light, the link between cremation and pottery in early Roman Britain can be seen as a means of promoting the selective remembering and forgetting of the dead.*

### INTRODUCTION: CREMATION, CERAMICS AND CINERARY URNS

The first centuries BC and AD see the adoption and spread of new ways of disposing of the dead in south-east Britain both prior to, and following, the Roman conquest. An important element of these changes is the spread of cremation, seemingly drawing upon a mixture of indigenous Late Iron Age and imported Roman funerary traditions (Collis 1977; Morris 1992, 48–51; Philpott 1991). Cremation itself may not have been the novelty of these mortuary practices as much as the widespread choice to inter the cremated remains with, and often within, ceramic vessels.

Ceramics are employed in the cremation and inhumation graves of numerous past cultures. Indeed, the practice appears familiar and even mundane to modern-day archaeologists and the wider public. This might be because of the apparent ubiquity of the practice in many periods of the past, the commonplace discovery of ceramics in Roman graves and the well-recognized use of ceramics in all spheres of Late Iron Age and early Roman society. As we shall see, many of the ceramics placed with the dead were not ‘ritual’ artefacts created especially for funerals, but items employed in daily social and economic life and hence seemingly expedient grave goods. Moreover, it might also be suggested that the familiarity and apparent ‘common-sense’ nature of the rite to archaeologists are enhanced by the fact that the majority of the dead in contemporary Britain are cremated and urns are frequently employed to contain the ashes prior to scattering, for burial in cemeteries and for display within the home (Davies 1997, 28–31).

For these reasons, Roman archaeologists do not appear to have explicitly addressed why ceramics should be used so widely as both containers and grave goods placed with the

cremated dead. Instead, discussions of Roman mortuary practices have tended to focus upon monuments and tombs raised over graves, high status rites where glass and metal containers are employed. Equally, the tendency in recent archaeological studies of mortuary practices to focus upon variability and spatial contexts has drawn attention away from the equally important question of why certain artefacts were so commonly and repeatedly placed with the dead.

Yet the interment of portions of the ashes in ceramic vessels, sometimes accompanied by other vessels, was by no means the only option available to early Roman communities. Certainly the choice to cremate was one among several available to the mourners for disposing of the dead including inhumation and excarnation. The potential significance of ceramics in cremation burials is emphasized when we realize that this was in no way the only, nor necessarily the easiest, means for disposing of the cremated remains. There are numerous archaeological and historical examples from prehistory, the ancient world and the Middle Ages, where cremated material is buried un-urned (i.e. without containers), or interred within containers and vessels made of materials other than pottery (e.g. Proudfoot 1963).

When ceramics are placed with the dead, there are numerous ways in which they can be used. For instance, urns can be made especially for funerals (Richards 1987) and may be deliberately constructed to resemble other forms of material culture including houses, animals and human bodies (e.g. Bradley 2002; Jones 2001), none of which appears significant in early Roman cremation rites. The use of ceramics to contain the dead is also not necessarily 'common-sense', as in some Late Iron Age contexts ceramics are used as grave goods but not as containers (e.g. Fitzpatrick 1997). Furthermore, in certain Bronze Age funerals, urns were placed inverted over cremated remains (Bradley 1998, 150–1).

There is equally no reason why cremated remains should be buried in a single deposit or even buried at all. Archaeological evidence shows that cremated remains can be recovered from numerous archaeological contexts including pyre sites, sweepings from the pyre and deliberate deposits of pyre debris (McKinley 1997; Niblett 1999). Often, 'cremation burials' represent only 'token' deposits with the majority of cremated remains dispersed elsewhere (Kaliff 1998; McKinley in Fitzpatrick 1997). The ethnographic record and experiences from our own society illuminate the rich variety of cremation methods. Cremation can encompass many different degrees and scales of burning the dead, from roasting, cooking, partial cremation of the whole body or full cremation of body parts, through to the full cremation of the entire body (Oestigaard 2000; Williams 2000). Cremation can be a rite of separation enacted early in the funerary sequence, or equally it can be conducted as a 'secondary rite' in which the bones are cremated individually or collectively (Downes 1999; Metcalf and Huntington 1991; e.g. Niblett 1999). There are well-documented ethnographic case studies in which ashes are collected from pyres and buried in ceramic urns (e.g. van Gennep 1960, 149–52), yet numerous methods for disposing of cremated remains are known. These might include leaving the ashes on the pyre site, scattering ashes over land or water, displaying ashes within above-ground monuments or within the household, the construction of effigies from cremated remains, the transportation of ashes as an element of the mourner's clothing or even the consumption of cremated remains in funerary meals (Williams 2000). Moreover, some societies practise more than one method for disposing of ashes according to the social position of the deceased. Equally, at any given funeral, different proportions of the cremated remains can be dispersed in different ways (Williams 2000). Given that a similar range of possibilities was available to communities in prehistoric and early historic Britain, then the

interment of cremated material in ceramic urns represents a distinctive choice rather than a practical necessity.

Therefore, the widespread adoption of cremated burial with ceramic containers is not a 'common sense' response to cremation, but a cultural and social choice made and orchestrated by mourners in order to commemorate the dead in a particular way. Furthermore, the repetition of this rite need not be seen as simply a 'normative' practice, but reveals central tenets concerning how the dead were expected to be interred and the way the dead were perceived and remembered.

How, then, might we wish to explain the different uses of ceramics in early Roman cremation rites? Arguing that the ubiquity of ceramics in early Roman cremation rituals has more than prosaic significance, this paper suggests that an explanation can be sought in the role of cremation rituals as 'technologies of remembrance' (see Jones 2003; Williams 2001), ways of selectively remembering and forgetting the dead and the past. Connected to this argument, it is suggested that food and drink were consumed by the living and placed with the dead to create memories and sustain relationships between the living and the dead. It is also suggested that the consumption of food and drink provided an appropriate metaphor for communities disposing of the dead by cremation. Food, drink and the human body were all 'consumed' during the sequence of cremation rituals. In both senses, ceramics associated with cremated remains and the consumption of food and drink promoted the transformation of identity and social memory in early Roman Britain. Before developing this argument, it is first necessary to explain the possible connections between cremation and the reproduction of social memory.

#### CREMATION AND SOCIAL MEMORY

While traditional studies have seen the mortuary practices of early Roman Britain as an index of Romanization (e.g. Alcock 1981; Toynbee 1971), since the 1980s these perspectives have been augmented by social, symbolic and ideological interpretations (Fitzpatrick 1997; Millett 1993; Morris 1992; Pearce 1998; Weekes 2001). Building upon these perspectives, recent studies have emphasized the role of mortuary practices in constructing identities and social memories (e.g. Barrett 1993; Hope 1997, 2003). To the modern eye, it is easy to conceptualize an early Roman tombstone in terms of social memory. The imagery, text and materiality of this form of material culture, as well as the use of the monument as a focus for commemorative rituals combine to make it an explicit statement concerning the identity of the living and the dead. Tombstones serve to commemorate the past and promote the future (Hope 1997). Following Valerie Hope, it is important to realize that social memories in the ancient world were created and communicated through a variety of media (Hope 2003). These might include ritual actions, visual display and texts. Each of these media contains elements of what Paul Connerton (1989) has not only described as 'inscribing' memories (memories inscribed onto places and objects through rituals and writing) but also as 'incorporating' memories (memories created and constituted through bodily practices by the participants and onlookers during rituals).

If social memory during funerals can be constructed through ritual practices and bodily experience as well as the construction of permanent memorials, this leads us to consider the potential role of cremation in strategies of remembering and forgetting. Cremation certainly would have offered a vivid spectacle affecting all of the human senses for those participating and witnessing the event. Cremation was also connected to a complex sequence of temporal and

spatial ritual actions both before and after the cremation (Pearce 1998; Weekes 2001). This included the preparation of the corpse, procession to the cremation site, the cremation itself and the rites culminating in burial, building a funerary monument and any subsequent rituals focusing on the burial site (Fitzpatrick 1997). As with many rites of passage, cremation rituals can serve to transform, fragment and reconfigure the material identity of the dead. In many societies past and present, this process of change is often thought to parallel the changing social, cosmological and ontological status of survivors through the liminal period of mourning and of the deceased as they move from living person to ancestor (Davies 1997; Hertz 1960; Metcalf and Huntington 1991). These rites served to transform the physical remains of the deceased, and hence to mediate relationships between the living, the dead and social memory.

A variety of different social memories might be selectively recalled, managed, suppressed, dispersed and invented by the ritual process of cremation in which bodies and artefacts were transformed and reconfigured. These might include retrospective memories of the deceased's character and social standing, their network of social and political relationships, their personal biographies and past occupations. Cremation ceremonies might equally have been involved in evoking prospective memories of an identity aspired to in a future life (see Hope 1997, 2003). In many societies, prospective and retrospective memories are carefully entangled in the staged forgetting and remembering of the past (Hallam and Hockey 2001). Equally, social memories constructed in early Roman funerals might have sacred and mythical elements. As well as serving to transform and articulate social relations between the mourners and the deceased, funerals can serve to connect both living and dead agents to perceived ancestral or supernatural persons, events and realms. Therefore, understanding early Roman cremation practices as a 'technology of remembrance' marries together the current 'social' orthodoxy in mortuary archaeology with a more traditional focus on the cultural and religious significance of disposing of the dead.

Social memories are also closely linked to power and ideology in contemporary society. For instance, they might be used to legitimize or contest claimed relations between the present and the past. Mortuary memories were not only statements of identity, or of transformed identity. They were also the means of using the past as a political tool in disputes, competitions and negotiations over power, authority and resources as well as social identity.

How might artefacts associated with the cremation process and with the interment of the ashes serve to commemorate the dead? Artefacts can play a central role in this process by symbolizing and mediating (together with the treatment of body and bones) the ways in which the dead were remembered at each stage of the cremation rites. In many societies, artefacts placed in the final grave deposit, whether possessions of, or gifts to, the dead, can articulate the transformed status of the deceased and the prospective construction of a new social identity intended to be remembered by mourners once the grave has been concealed and buried. Artefacts may not symbolize the social identity of the dead in a direct or static sense, but instead may act as agents of mnemonic transformation. As John Pearce has argued, this is a process concerning a series of presentations and representations of the dead (Pearce 1998, 103).

#### VESSELS IN ROMANO-BRITISH CREMATION BURIALS

In order to explore the suggested role of cremation in social remembrance, this paper will focus upon one aspect of the cremation practices found in early Roman Britain: the deposition of ceramic vessels in the grave.

Although not directly applicable to early Roman Britain, numerous Roman and Late Antique written sources attest to the ubiquitous practice of eating and drinking at many stages of the funerary sequence as well as the use of food and drink in rites of purification and sacrifice (Alcock 1981; Effros 2002; Toynbee 1971). Funerary rituals connected to food and drink could serve to denote the status of the participants and those organizing the funeral through conspicuous consumption. They also served to orchestrate social relations among the living and with the dead, ancestors and the gods (Garnsey 1999; Lindsay 1998). Food and drink served in promoting the remembering and forgetting of the past through the tastes, smells, visual spectacle and metaphor of consumption. In this light, it is argued that food and drink also provided a multi-sensual mnemonic and metaphorical link between cremation of the body and consumption. Both cinerary urns and accessory vessels can therefore be seen to contribute to the commemoration of the dead through their burial.

Vessels occur in a variety of forms, quantities and qualities in early Roman graves. A range of evidence shows that pottery and glass vessels, perhaps containing food, drink and aromatic substances, were often placed on the cremation pyre. Ceramics have been found in *ustrina*, *bustum* graves (i.e. *in situ* cremation burials; e.g. Mackinder 2000), and within pyre debris (McKinley 2000). Sometimes there is evidence for deliberate fragmentation (Foster 1986, 196; Niblett 1999) and for different types of vessel connected to eating and drinking during each stage of the funeral (Polfer 2000). The remains of cremated animals found in many cremation burials and accessory vessels suggest that the sacrifice and consumption of animals was an integral part of the funerary feasting (e.g. Evans and Maynard 1997, 199; McKinley and Smith in Fitzpatrick 1997). Moreover, there is increasing evidence of meals cooked in the cremation pyre with the dead body, perhaps simultaneously serving to enhance the pyre's aroma but also to provide a meal for the dead (Mackinder 2000, 11–12).

Whether fragmentary or intact, ceramic vessels were also important in the burial context. Practices vary over time and between regions while the number and types of vessels appear to vary depending on the status and identity of the deceased (Philpott 1991). In many cemeteries, like the small rural burial ground recently excavated near Westhampnett, Sussex, the cinerary urn could be buried alone, but on other occasions the dead were accompanied by up to eight other vessels (Fitzpatrick 1997; see also Philpott 1991). Many different vessel-types can be found including cups, beakers, flasks, flagons, bowls, jars and plates. Philpott (1991) has argued that there is a tendency for the combination of vessel-types to reflect those used in a meal, although this is far from being a universal pattern (Fitzpatrick 1997, 284; Millett 1993, 258). In wealthy graves, full dining services are sometimes recovered, while in other instances the fragmented remains of pottery vessels used in feasting and drinking are deliberately buried in the fill of the grave (e.g. Millett 1986, 1987).

Vessels and their contents were not simply sacrificed on the pyre and in the grave; they were widely and frequently used as cinerary urns as well. In addition, pots and tiles were sometimes used as lids for vessels. In some instances, vessels formed multiple layers of containment (Philpott 1991). On rare occasions, we sometimes find evidence of clay pipes used to 'feed' the dead following burial (Wheeler 1929).

The vessels employed as cinerary urns were usually those of a size and shape that allowed the remains to be placed in a single pot, facilitating easy transportation and burial. Jars are the most commonly selected containers (Philpott 1991, 35; e.g. Evans and Maynard 1997, 221). The choice to use a ceramic or glass container for the ashes, and the precise form and character, may have been governed by other, less prosaic, factors. Pots are sometimes altered

for their funerary use and evidence for deliberate fragmentation in various ways through smashing, holing and chipping the rim has been encountered (Taylor 2001, 102). Some show signs of being 'spoilers', pots that were damaged during firing and that could not have been used in the domestic sphere (Philpott 1991). Their use is usually explained in functional terms, but might further indicate the use of broken items to emphasize the breaking down of the deceased's physical wholeness during cremation and the post-cremation rites. However, a key observation is that these were items that were not produced with the specific design of communicating the identity of the dead unlike in, say, early Anglo-Saxon cremation rituals (Richards 1987). Indeed, richly decorated ceramics as well as head- and face-pots appear to have been avoided in preference for more domestic and mundane artefacts (Braithwaite 1984). The artefacts selected tended to be cheap and easily available items and consequently they were simultaneously those objects most closely connected to daily practices of eating and drinking.

Furthermore it can be noted that rather than seeing a hard and fast distinction between cinerary urns and 'grave goods', it is equally clear that food, drink and cremated bone were all contained and interred in comparable ways during many funerals. Connected to this argument is the evidence that many cremation burials are far smaller than might be expected had the total cremated remains been buried, indicating that only 'token' deposits of bones were often buried in urns. Presumably the cremated remains often remained on the pyre site, were circulated among the living or were deposited elsewhere. One reading of this evidence is that food and drink did not 'accompany' the cremated dead. Instead, food, drink and cremated remains were all selected for burial as comparable sacrificial offerings (see McKinley in Fitzpatrick 1997; McKinley 2000). To look at it another way, the identity of the dead composed in the grave was often created out of the containers of food and drink as well as cremated bone.

#### FUNERALS, FOOD AND DRINK

The archaeological and written evidence suggests that the consuming of food and drink was clearly important in early Roman cremation rites, but what was the specific mnemonic importance of feasting and sacrificing food and drink and the burial of the cremated dead? In many cultures, rites of passage including funerals have carefully prescribed and proscribed culinary practices and the provision of specially killed animals, cooked foods and liquids in rituals of purification, veneration and transformation. Food and drink are often metaphorically connected to the social, cosmological and ontological transformation of the dead and mourners (see Hamilakis 1998; Foster 1990; Parry 1985). Moreover, practices surrounding the preparing, exchanging and consuming of food and drink can be important 'incorporating practices' – ways of remembering through the experience of the body's senses (Connerton 1989; Küchler 2002). Just as the feasting and the sacrifice of food and drink can be central to the construction of social relations and the person's social position during life, so upon death, food embodies the dead person into a new state of being and incorporates them into social memory (cf. Hamilakis 1998). In some instances, the offering of food to the dead is intended to sustain the dead on their journey to the afterlife, in others it is to placate the anger of the deceased, and in further cases it represents part of a sacrificial contract with the deities believed to receive the dead into the afterlife. For example, the ghost or spirit of the dead is often regarded as dangerous and a consuming force that requires nourishment after death and before the end of the obsequies. The sharing and giving of food between the living and with the dead create a solidarity and group identity across the

divide of death. Indeed, in the terms of Bloch and Parry (1982), the mixture of sacrifice, consumption and intoxication may emphasize vitality and regeneration in the face of the chaos and disorder threatened by death (see also Thompson 1988).

Food and drink can form a part of broader sensory experiences created during mortuary rituals with the aim of influencing remembrance. In many societies, different flavours, temperatures and the use of spices, as well as the aromas given off by food, can have important symbolic connotations linked to ritual stages at the funeral (Parry 1985). The experience of food through all the senses as well as its incorporation into the body is often seen metaphorically in the incorporation of the dead into memory (Battaglia 1990, 1992; Eves 1996; Foster 1990). Feasting and the sacrifice of vessels with food and drink would make the event memorable as well as evoke the remembrance of previous feasting events during earlier funerals. Similar ideas have been discussed by Yannis Hamilakis with reference to the role of funerary feasting in Bronze Age Crete (see Hamilakis 1998, 1999), and the close association of the vessels used to contain liquids and foods with the dead suggests a possible mnemonic significance in early Romano-British cremation rites.

The aroma of food being cooked and consumed may have a powerful impact upon those attending funerals. Smell has a direct and powerful effect on memory; odours can mask the decomposition of the corpse as well as create experiences that evoke past events, people and places in funerary contexts (Küchler 2002; Kus 1993). The textures of food and their containers may also be significant. The close physical proximity of food and drink to the corpse is a further sensual aspect of feasting and sacrifice. Substances associated with the body are often regarded as dangerous and polluting, but through touching and incorporating food intended for sharing with or sacrificing to the dead, and by handling and interring objects linked to the funerary feast, eating and drinking emphasize the intimate links with the corpse.

The visual impact of food can be appreciated at many levels. The changing sensual impact of food and drink throughout the funeral in a prescribed sequence may play a central part in a participant's experience of the events. It may also encourage close relationships between feasting and the relationships between the living and the dead. The sheer quantity of food and drink gathered during the funeral could create a spectacle in itself. Equally theatrical might be the animal sacrifice and songs, dances or other performances linked to the preparation, exchange and consumption of food and drink that punctuate the funerary rites, marking stages in the orchestrated transition of mourners and the dead. Colour may also have a role in remembrance (see Jones 2002). Food and drink also have an impact upon the emotional states of mourners, enhancing or suppressing the collective mood as well as altering the state of consciousness of participants as appropriate for sanctioned expressions of bereavement (see Tarlow 1999). In these ways, food and drink serve to enhance remembrance and the changing relationships between the living and the dead through the funerary rites.

The link between consumption and cremation may be closer still (Oestigaard 2000). Jonathan Parry (1985) has discussed how the transformation of the dead in post-cremation rites in northern India is closely connected metaphorically to acts of feasting and consumption. In the post-cremation rituals, balls of rice are used to represent the deceased's body and are consumed by the mourners to symbolize the incorporation of the dead into a new ancestral identity. Parry's reading of the symbolism of this rite is that the dead are 'eaten' by the mourners. This symbolic consumption of the dead is taken more literally in other societies: certain Amazonian Indian societies mix cremated remains with the post-funerary meal and consume

them as a means of restoring the vitality of the dead to the living (Chagnon 1982; see also Metcalf and Huntington 1991).

Although no direct and formal analogy is suggested between any single ethnographic case study and the early Roman period, these studies illuminate the potential significance of eating and drinking as metaphorical and mnemonic means of selectively remembering and forgetting.

DISCUSSION: TECHNOLOGIES OF REMEMBRANCE IN EARLY ROMAN BRITAIN

Admittedly, the argument presented here offers only one (and necessarily tentative given the limited space) reading of the role of ceramics and social memory in early Roman cremation rituals. At the very least, it is hoped that this paper encourages further debate among archaeologists concerning the possible roles of seemingly mundane and practical grave goods in commemorating the dead in past societies. By thinking of ceramics as a part of the ritual process of cremation and, in turn, the role of cremation in remembrance, we are able to reappraise frequent archaeological discoveries in a new light. Indeed, as a means of connecting the process of cremation to the metaphors of consuming food and drink, the precise form and fabric of the containers and accessory vessels may have been of less significance than the act of including pottery in the grave. In addition, the repeated act of burying pots with the dead may have facilitated the remembrance of earlier funerals in which similar practices took place and helped in the emergence of new metaphors and strategies for remembrance in which both the remains of the dead, and food and drink were conceptualized as consumed by fire and sacrificed into the grave.

Through the repeated and increasing use of ceramics as grave goods and cinerary urns in early Roman Britain, it is tempting to think that a conceptual and metaphorical link was made with the process of cremation, in which the dead are in a sense 'cooked' or 'consumed' by the flames, and the consumption of food and drink. In the final burial context, both 'grave goods' and 'cinerary urns' were containers placed into the soil as final acts of remembrance, and all were frequently associated with food, drink and aromatic substances. The cremated dead, when placed in cinerary urns, appear to be likened to the sacrificial offerings or prepared meals that surrounded the ashes in the grave. We cannot know exactly how this was viewed, but it is as if the dead were themselves given up as sacrificial offerings to be 'consumed' into memory. As mourners 'embodied' memories through eating and drinking, so the dead themselves were perceived as foods that needed to be offered to the ground in order to incorporate them and enhance their remembrance through their physical absence (see Küchler 2002).

This perspective helps us to understand the importance of cremation in the new socio-political arena created by the Roman invasion and the selective adoption of Roman ways of living and dying by native communities. Cremation may have been employed by many different social groups for contrasting reasons in early Roman Britain. Yet in each way, it operated as a distinctive means of connecting the living with the dead, the ancestors and the past. Indeed, it might be possible to regard cremation as a more widely adopted 'technology of remembrance' than the more restricted elite practices of monumental funerary inscriptions and tomb-building. In this sense, cremation burial in ceramic containers should be seen alongside new ways of perceiving and managing the body (e.g. Carr 2001; Jundi and Hill 1998), new practices involving material culture (e.g. Eckardt 2000), and new ways of eating and drinking (e.g. Meadows 1997) that emerged either side of the Roman conquest. Cremation was therefore not simply a new

'fashion' or the wholesale adoption of Roman practice, but a way of disposing of the dead connected to evolving ways of promoting memory through metaphors of transformation and consumption.

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