

Archaeological and Historical Notes

A 'Belgic' Cremation Burial Found at West Mersea

by ISOBEL THOMPSON

The burial, comprising four pottery vessels and a small amount of cremated bone, was found in 1979 by Mr. Stutter, of 42 Fairhaven Avenue, West Mersea, when digging a trench for the building of a new garage in his garden. The pots and bone were collected and taken to the Colchester and Essex Museum by Mr. Stutter, who described them as being placed together in a cavity in the earth. P. R. Sealey of the Museum staff visited the site and collected some further sherds; he subsequently drew my attention to the burial and invited me to submit a note on the finds. The special interest of this burial, the first of its kind to be found in the area, will be discussed below.

The pottery

1. (My cat. No. 870.) Pedestal urn: rather gritty grey-brown soft grog-tempered fabric, quite fine grog, dark grey surfaces, smooth outside, worn to pink at rim and foot. The form is Cam. 201 (Hawkes and Hull, 1947, pi. LXXIV), or A:2 in my own type series of 'Belgic' pottery. The distinctive feature of this form is the so-called 'dice-box' foot, where the join between base and body of the pot is higher and narrower than the internal base, and is usually marked by a cordon to strengthen the join. It is chiefly an Essex form: it is the commonest form of pedestal in the Lexden cemetery, with other examples from Ardleigh and Colchester (Birchall, 1965, Nos. 132—3, Ardleigh, and 186, Colchester; hereafter cited as AB numbers); and just across the Suffolk border at Boxford (Owles and Smedley, 1970, e.g. Nos. 5 and 41). It is not a Kent form at all, where the only related example is a large oddly stilted vessel from Aylesford (AB 66), but in Hertfordshire there were four in the Welwyn Garden City grave (Stead, 1967) and two in the Hertford Heath grave (Holmes and Friend, 1955-7).

The West Mersea vessel has the neat compact form and narrow neck found in some of the Lexden pots (AB 187, 190).

2. (My cat. No. 871.) Cup: slightly gritty-feeling soft grey-brown grog-tempered fabric with pink showing below grey-brown surfaces, burnished outside to dark grey. The form is E1-2 in my type series, but a small shallow version: it is very closely paralleled by two vessels from Lexden (AB 176, 177). Other similar versions occur at Twitty Fee, Danbury (Dunning, 1934, fig. 2, No. 7), and Boxford (*op. cit.*, No. 1). The Sheepen form Cam. 21 IB is slightly taller; this shallow form is not closely paralleled elsewhere.

3. Pedestalled cup (873): thick, soft and very friable dark grey slightly gritty grog-tempered fabric with dark grey surfaces. This is form F3^t in my type series: but there is only one known parallel as small as this, from Creeksea (AB 215). The kick of the carination is an unusual feature of this vessel, which has rather uncertain detailing of its cordons.

4. Butt beaker (872): gritty grey-brown, with some grog, and grey-brown surfaces, unburnished, and stamped. Originally it had some tooling on the neck above the cordon, and below the decoration. The fabric is grittier than that of the other vessels. It is a barrel-shaped butt-beaker

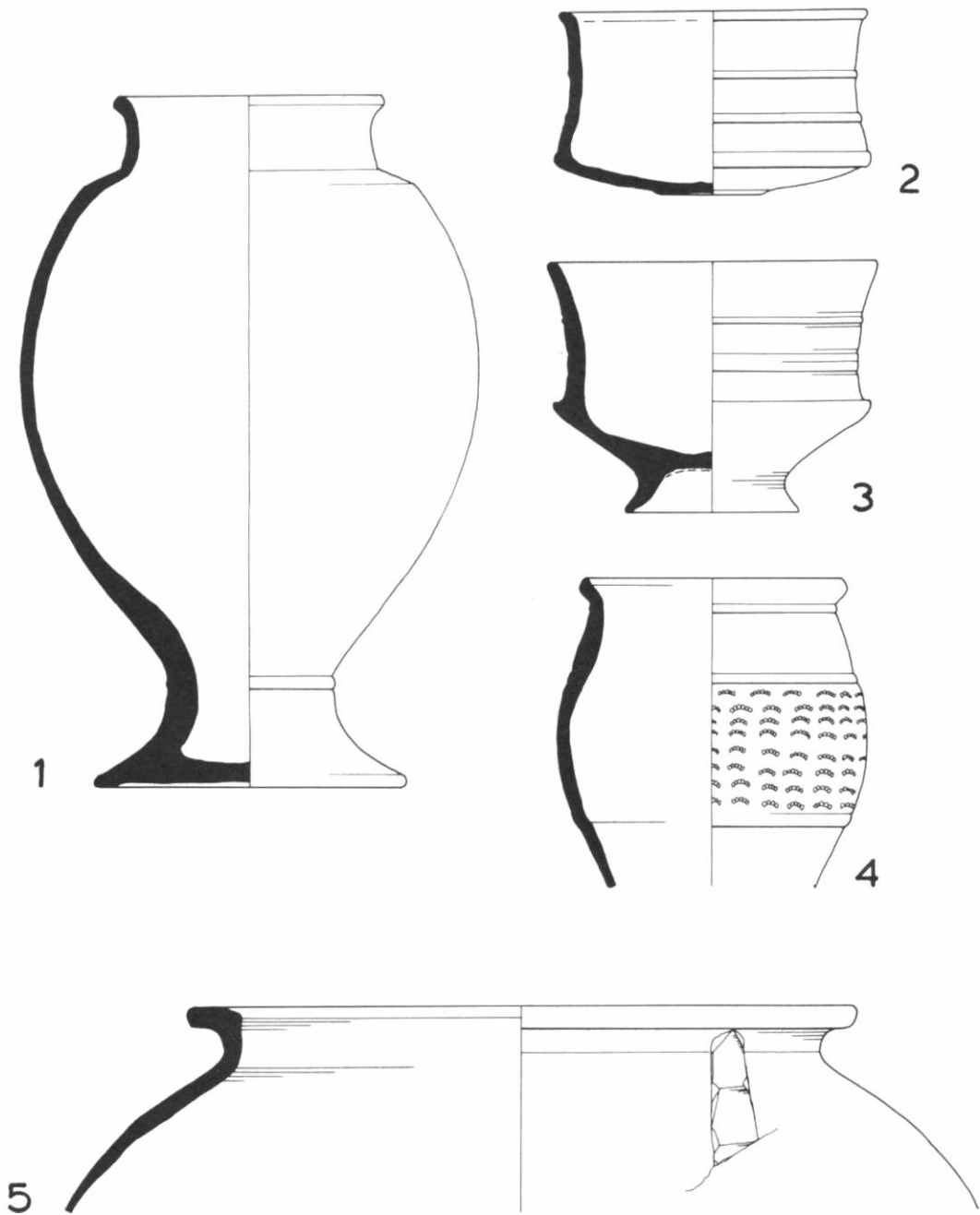


Fig. 1 Pottery from West Mersea

copy, a common shape, with an unusual decoration for which I know of no immediate parallel. Form G5-3.

The burial is noteworthy in that it provides some unexpected dating evidence, in the association of an A:2 pedestal urn with a copy of a Gallo-Belgic import. No other such association is known: this type of pedestal urn is generally regarded as an early form that was in use before the imports of Gallo-Belgic wares. This is undoubtedly true, as it is unlikely that such wares would not have been included with them in the Lexden cemetery had they been available. But it is now clear that an overlap occurs. This West Mersea burial has its closest links with the graves from Lexden and Creeksea, as might be expected since they are the nearest in spatial terms; none of its individual close relations are in graves that also included Gallo-Belgic wares or their copies.

Unstratified sherds from the foundation trench comprised two coarse reddish-brown hand-made flint-gritted sherds; the base of a small colour-coated beaker; and some grey fragments, one or two possibly Roman, but mostly medieval, including a base fragment. Several pieces joined together to form a substantial part of the rim of a medieval jar:

5. Jar rim (976): pink very sandy fabric with pale grey surfaces; dark grey core at thickness of rim. Decorated with an applied clay strip; the rim is distorted at this point. For a close parallel to this vessel, cf. a storage-jar rim and probable base from Danbury (Drury and Pratt, 1975, fig. 60, No. A14). The jar was from a group of pottery from a probable pit near the kiln site, and was of a fabric that was common on the kiln site itself, but the vertical neck of A14 was felt to indicate a rather earlier date for this group: 'perhaps belonging to the second half of the 13th century'. The Danbury vessel seems similar in both form and fabric to the West Mersea example.

The bones by Don Brothwell, Institute of Archaeology

1. 16 fragments of cremated bone, mainly long bones. Possibly but not certainly human; probably at least one adult represented. Also part of an uncremated vertebral bone of Bos/Equus size.
2. Over 20 fragments of cremated bone, including 13 pieces from long bones; also 2 fragments of skull. Thickness of long bone cortex and skull vault suggests an adult individual; sex could not be determined.

Clearly the head and parts of the limbs are represented, suggesting that a whole body may have been initially burnt, though most bone is missing, and this does not amount to the quantity actually resulting from a cremation.

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