THE BRONZE AGE GOLD, AMBER AND SHALE CUPS FROM SOUTHERN ENGLAND AND THE EUROPEAN MAINLAND: A REVIEW ARTICLE

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This publication from the British Museum reviews – in the light of the crushed, corrugated, gold cup recently (2001) found on Ringlemere Farm, near Sandwich – the nature of Western Europe’s precious cups, unique and distinctive vessels. Investigation of the Ringlemere cup’s find-spot showed that it was likely to have been ploughed from a huge barrow, 150m in diameter, which had been sited upon a single-entranced henge. This remarkable discovery, made by a responsible metal detectorist, has now been definitively published. The A4 sized, glossy-backed publication is entitled The Ringlemere Cup, Precious Cups and the beginning of the Channel Bronze Age. It has been edited by Stuart Needham, Keith Parfitt and Gill Varndell. They are joined by Aaron Birchenough, Chris Butler, Caroline Cartwright and Susan La Niece. The illustrations are by Barry Corke and Stephen Crummy.

Following upon the introductory apparatus there are nine comprehensive chapters, the work of the principals. Thus The Background and Survey Work (1) and The Excavations 2002-2005 (2) are the work of Keith Parfitt. The Gold Cup (3) has been studied by Stuart Needham, supported by Susan La Niece, and Other Prehistoric Material (4) together with some radiocarbon dates are the province of Stuart Needham, Gillian Varndell, Chris Butler and Keith Parfitt, who also examines Ringlemere and Ritual and Burial Landscapes of Kent (5). Thereafter Stuart Needham discusses the Precious Cups of the Early Bronze Age (6), Precious Cups: Concept, Context and Custodianship (7), Networks of Contact and Meaning: The Beginning of the Channel Bronze Age (8) and, with Gill Varndell, has set down a catalogue of Early Bronze Age Precious Cups in north west Europe (9). There is a modest but effective bibliography with lists of figures, Tables, Plates and remarkable colour Plates.

The catalogue is of considerable value to all concerned with the series of cups termed ‘precious’. The Ringlemere cup, found in a plough-crushed condition, takes pride of place with an ‘ideal reconstruction’, a computer-
checked technique, which has been used for the sixteen vessels studied, which are seven are of gold, two of silver, two of amber and four of shale. Details are also given of a cup, perhaps of shale, found in a large barrow at Stoborough in Dorset (Ashbee, 1960,86). Of especial interest is the illustration (fig. 41) of the Rillaton gold cup with a corrugated, rounded base, as evidenced by a water colour sketch (Colour Plate 7) depicting the cup as found, perhaps even in 1818; this clearly indicates that the base has been flattened subsequently. This is of importance, as it has for long been thought to be beaker-like (Ashbee, 1960, pl. XXIVa; Clarke, 1970 (2), frontispiece).

Until the 1955 advent of the Fritzdorf gold cup, the Rillaton gold cup was unique, although counterparts in amber and shale were known. Its vicissitudes were considerable and it is no longer the cup taken from a cist in the great Rillaton cairn early in the nineteenth century. Indeed, its history, prior to its accession by William IV, is obscure. It subsequently lingered for long among the miscellany at Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, came into the hands of George V, who is reputed to have used it as a receptacle for his collar studs, and was finally passed to the British Museum by Edward VIII. R.A. Smith records damage (1936-7, 2). It is unknown whether or not its base was flattened by royal command, but it should not be overlooked that it spent some time on a Mine Captain’s chimneypiece. Smith (1936-7, 2) said that ‘the metal has now been pressed into its original shape, but a few cracks remain, and the handle has been replaced with some extra added rivets’. Moreover, it should be noted that until the emergence of Kent’s Ringlemere gold cup, few thought about the Rillaton cup’s base, as the handle attachments were similar to those of the Fritzdorf cup (Ashbee 1960, pls XXIVa, b: Piggott 1965, 134). However, David Clarke (1970 (2), frontispiece) shows clearly the Rillaton’s cup mutilated base. Notably, during the nineteenth century, Daniel Wilson (1851, 406-7) reported the cup’s date of discovery as 1818, saying that ‘it is bell-shaped and rounded below, like the Danish gold cups ... engraved in the Guide to Northern Antiquities’. Sir Edward Smirke (1867) advanced its date of discovery to 1837 and prefaced his account with an engraving of cup and base, reproduced by W.C. Borlase (1872, 38) and others during the nineteenth century. He said that ‘the handle, which has been a little crushed, is attached by six little rivets, three at the top and three at the bottom, secured by small lozenge-shaped nuts or collars’. A washer, however, was missing when the cup was shown to the Society of Antiquaries of London in June 1867. Smirke was of the view that ‘... the cup does not stand firmly on its base and that I have doubts whether it was intended to do so’.

The Ringlemere gold cup discovered in Kent (Fig. 1) (Needham et al. 2006 – hereafter abbreviated to N 06 – 31-8, figs. 23, 40) has a carinated, corrugated body and rounded base, with an invert omphalos (N 06, 37, pl.
12) and a handle with riveted, lozengiform, washered attachment, similar to that of the Rillaton and Fritzdorf cups. It has a body height of 123mm and is larger than the Rillaton cup (Fig. 2), which has an estimated body height of 95mm, and is marginally smaller than the body height of the Fritzdorf cup (Fig. 3), which is 121mm. There has been a reconstruction of the cups, particularly of the well-known Rillaton gold cup, and an ideal drawing (N 06, 85, fig. 4i) convincingly depicts it as having a rounded base but which, unlike the Ringlemere cup (Fig. 1) is corrugated. This reconstruction is, however, substantiated by a watercolour depiction of the Rillaton gold cup by Charles Hamilton Smith in 1837, which came to light in the Plymouth & West Devon Record Office in Plymouth (N 06, 84).

It is likely that the Rillaton gold cup’s interment within a pottery vessel,
within a stone-cist, together with an ogival dagger and what may have been faience beads, all furnishing a cremation burial (Gerlorff 1975, 107), kept it free from damage. Only the cup and a piece of the dagger have survived and, as can be seen from the newly-found water-colour sketch (N 06, Colour Pl. 6), the cup was clearly undamaged when found. It has been said that it was found as early as 1818 (Wilson 1851, 406-7) and that before 1837 it adorned a Mine Captain’s chimneypiece. Stuart Needham has now established that there is a considerable amount of recent damage, besides the flattening of the base. Indeed, there has been polishing and there are striations, stress cracks, presumably from the base-flattening, and not least what may have been nineteenth-century repairs involving the use of solder. Moreover, the handle may have been removed and reattached, and a missing rivet provided.

As was briefly observed above, the similarities of workmanship observed in the Rillation and Fritzdorf gold cups (Ashbee 1960, 146) were thought

Fig. 2 A reconstruction of the Rillaton gold cup with its base restored to its original form. (After Stuart Needham et al. 2006.)
significant, although whether or not the Western European craftsmen were directly influenced by those of Mycenae (Piggott 1965, 134) is debatable. Nevertheless, it can now be seen, in the pages of this remarkable report (N 06, 83-8) that there are three gold cups, Rillaton, Fritzdorf and Ringlemere (figs 2, 3, 1) which could have been the work of a specific craftsman or perhaps a school. Two not dissimilar gold cups found upon the European mainland are without handles but are clearly allied to, or perhaps inspired by, the small southern English-Rheinland trio. That from Eschenz, Canton Thurgau, Switzerland (Ashbee 1977) bears corrugations supplemented by bossed and oblique stroke ornamentation and has a pronounced, tapering, corrugated orbicular base within an omphalos. A not dissimilar gold cup of broader proportions, but, sadly, without provenance, but said to be South
German (N 06, 92-3) is ornamented with, below its rim pointillé pendant triangles, topping the corrugations above its maximum girth. Below this are vertical and oblique rills, which emphasise its shallow, rounded, corrugated base. Closely allied to these two cups is the Gölenkamp gold cup from Bentheim, in Niedersachsen (Lower Saxony). Its decoration is corrugations below the rim, a triple banding of bosses, divided, one from the other, by considerable corrugations. Below these systems the cup has a plain body with a shallow convex base bearing corrugations which emphasise the flattened omphalos.

Composite construction, that is the top secured to a rounded base by rivets, is the mode employed by the Breton silver cup series. Nevertheless, it was a method used for the making of certain gold cups. A plain gold upper body-part is known from Ploumilliau, Côtes-du-Nord, Brittany (Briard 1984, 134, fig. 83a) while a broadly corrugated upper body-piece is from Cuxwold in Lincolnshire (Gerloff 1975, 257, pl. 57, N).

During 1974 the fragments of a much corroded, handled, silver cup, composite and of a plain form comparable with the Fritzdorf gold cup, were dug from a considerable barrow called Brun Bras, in Saint Adrien, about six miles south of Guingamp, in Brittany (Briard 1978; Ashbee 1979; Clarke et al. 1985, 135). Silver is not unknown in Breton earlier Bronze Age contexts. Pins and even wire spiral arm-rings, were with what was termed a silver bowl, dug from a barrow at St Fiacre, Morbihan (Piggott 1938, 100) during the nineteenth century. This, from a recent reconsideration, has been reconstructed as a beaker-like, hollow-based cup (N 06, 94-5). It accompanied a considerable assemblage of bronze daggers, axes and arrowheads, besides golden nails from a dagger hilt. Because of the complexities of cupellation it is possible that fine silver may have had an even greater prestige than gold in Bronze Age and Iron Age times (Tylcote 1962, s.v.).

Sabine Gerloff (1975, 184) followed a suggestion by Stuart Piggott (1938, 83) that Early Bronze Age ceramic cups, particularly those of the Rheinland’s Adlerberg assemblages, were an inspiration for the southern English cups of gold, amber and shale. In Britain, however, there is a not inconsiderable repertoire of handled beakers (Clarke 1970, 412-15), some of which have decorated handles and certain of which recall the precious cups. Some food vessels can also, from time to time, have not dissimilar loop-handles (Manby 2004). Indeed, in his comprehensive discussion of possible relationships with local pottery (N 06, 64-6), illustrates the well-known handled, lozenge-ornamented cup from Denzell Downs in Cornwall (Hencken 1932, 71 pl. vi, 4; Patchett 1944, 26-7, fig. 5) which he considers unique. He also observes that ‘strap or ribbon handles are proportionally much better represented in the Trevisker Urns of the South-West than any other Early Bronze Age pottery’. He also, while illustrating the series (N 06, 67, fig. 33), mentions the slotted incense
cups which could be, he notes, a part of the cultural system of the gold, amber and shale cups. Four such incense cups have come to light in Kent (Ashbee and Dunning 1960, 50). There are five from the south coast, and others are known from inland locations. However, they are conspicuous by their absence in Cornwall where, perhaps other miniature vessels had a similar role.

While ceramic-handled vessels would undoubtedly have been known to the craftsmen fashioning cups of all kinds and, indeed, also those for whom they were intended, the precious cups, as they have been termed, are individual pieces, with no more than general similarities. Their rounded bases would have needed a stand to keep them upright. The point is made that there is no wear on the lower parts of the cups which might have come about from prolonged use. Nevertheless, the close examination of the handles of certain shale cups has shown wear patterns that might have come about from suspension, perhaps when not in use. Stuart Needham (N 06, 72) also makes the point that were the cups to have had a role in ritual, they could be considered as a part of the shamanistic gear that might well be present amongst Early Bronze Age grave furniture (Piggott 1962; Woodward 2000, 118-22). With this notion in mind, the gold, and silver, cups could well have served the shamanistic summit, while those of amber and shale might betoken the usages of the lower scales in the hierarchy. Of Southern England’s two amber cups, that from the considerable barrow at Hove in Sussex is the best known (Curwen and Curwen 1924; Curwen 1954, 152-3, pl. xiii). Its handle ornamentation is comparable with the gold cups but its squat form may have been dictated by the, perhaps prestigious, block of amber from which it was made. Found in an oak coffin, where it could have furnished an inhumation burial, it was accompanied by a Wessex II ogival dagger (ApSimon 1954, 58), a whetstone and a fine-grained rock battle-axe, clearly a symbol of office. The only other amber cup, that from the Clandon Barrow, near Dorchester in Dorset (Drew and Piggott 1937; Clarke et al. 1985, 122-3) has an oval, almost pointed base, and its handle is missing. Nonetheless, its form is comparable, in a general sense, with the Fritzdorf gold cup. It furnished a secondary interment in the barrow, where it was accompanied by an atypical Wessex II ogival dagger, a quadrangular gold plate, a shale macehead with gold studs, a perforated incense cup and a collared urn.

The shale cups were featured by the Curwens (1924) and detailed by R.L.S. Newall (1928). There are two from Amesbury district in Wiltshire, and two from Honiton in Devon (Fox 1964,71-3, pls 25-6). They have now been featured and studied anew by Needham (N 06, 99-104) as a part of his detailed listing of the cups (83-104). They have line-ornamented handles not unlike those of the Rillaton and Fritzdorf gold cups and similar bases. One of the Amesbury shale cups has zoned, encircling, line decoration, as does one from Devon. This has zigzag line ornament inside
its rim. The bases are pronouncedly ovoid and, like the amber cup from the Clandon Barrow, almost pointed. The second cup from Amesbury has around it a single zone of lines as does that from Farway Down, Honiton. The base of the Amesbury cup could be best defined as a flattened ovoid. In general terms the forms of these shale cups is that of the Rillaton and Fritzdorf gold cups, a likeness accentuated by the decoration of the handles. The Ringlemere cup’s pronounced shoulder might well have been difficult to copy in shale.

The last item of Stuart Needham’s detailing of the cups and their characteristics (N 06, 103-4) is one dug from the Stoborough ‘King Barrow’ in Dorset (Ashbee 1960, 86-7), in 1767. A body had been partially wrapped in animal skins, in a large oak-trunk coffin and the cup, said to have been of wood or shale, was at the unwrapped end of the inhumation burial. It was depicted by Richard Gough (1786, xlv) as broken and distorted. R. Kirwan (1868, 628) and, later, J. Clift (1908) considered it to have been of shale. Needham has pursued the various sources and presents us with the depiction of a possibly handled, round-bottomed, line-ornamented, rather squat vessel. This diagonal line ornament of the base is not dissimilar in effect to that of the Swiss Eschenz gold cup and the unprovenanced South German example. It is stressed that the early accounts do not mention a handle but Needham is of the view that the depictions give the impression of the stump of a handle. The close scrutiny of this Stoborough cup’s details, such as they are, is a fitting conclusion to his consideration of the eighteen cups.

Functionally the gold, amber and shale cups, a graduated series, are likely to have been especial and prestigious drinking cups, perhaps, as has been noted above, an element of what Gordon Childe (1956, 131) termed the ideology. In passing it should be remembered that ‘drinking cups’ was a term originally applied to beakers by Colt Hoare and Thurnam (1871, 388), ‘beaker’ being an appellation introduced by John Abercromby (1904). Although the nature of the drink consumed from the prestigious cups is elusive, traces of beverages have been found in certain beakers. An age-bent horn ladle found in a beaker during the nineteenth century at Inverurie, in Scotland (Ashbee 1960, 122) hints at a liquid carefully measured when apportioned. More recently (Harrison 1980, 104) traces of mead, flavoured with meadowsweet, have been detected in a late style beaker, also found in Scotland. On the other hand, beverages, perhaps the counterparts of beers and ales, may have been regularly consumed to redress the vitamin deficiencies inherent in small communities.

Stuart Needham (N 06, 60-63) has discussed the chronology of the cups and, after an assessment of the appropriate factors, sees the metal cups as partially preceding those of amber and shale. Nonetheless, it is not impossible that the gold, silver, amber and shale cups were in contemporary use, for in archaeological terms such a situation can be
seen. A piece of a pointillé-ornamented ogival dagger was associated with the Rillaton cup, which, as has been stressed, has affinities with those from Fritzdorf and Ringlemere. Ogival daggers define, for the most part, Wessex II (ApSimon 1954), approximately the two centuries prior to 1500 BC. Such a dagger also accompanied the Hove amber cup and, a not dissimilar dagger was with the shale cup from Farway Down. Although the cups recall, in a general sense, certain beaker forms, yet, when they were made, beakers were almost a millennium in the past. They could, however, stand beside such as the Wessex gold-encased shale cones, which are patently aggrandised versions of Beaker conical shale buttons. Indeed, it can be said that most of the Wessex goldwork has a general Beaker character (Coles and Taylor 1971). Equally it is possible that the cups were, in their particular form, archaistic, to invoke the mores of the then perceived ancient past. The monumental dimension of this notion could have been the siting of barrows, as at Ringlemere, upon henges (N 06, 16-30).

Following upon the details of the excavation of the Ringlemere barrow and the realization that it had been sited upon a henge, Keith Parfitt, who led the work, discusses ‘Ringlemere and Ritual and Burial Landscapes of Kent’. He rightly sees, as has the present writer (Ashbee and Dunning 1960; Ashbee 2005, 119-53), that the paucity of field monuments in Kent, and even upon the Chalklands of east Kent, has been brought about by later land-use (N 06, 47-52). At the conclusion of his consideration Parfitt tells us of a dozen potential earthen long barrows, six of which are at no great distance from Ringlemere and that the Medway’s stone-built long barrows could have looked to a causewayed enclosure at Burham, a mile or so distant. The possibility that the Roman amphitheatre at Richborough may have been, as at Maumbury Rings, Dorchester (Bradley 1976), an adaptation of an earlier henge is also noted. Its hengiform was noted by Stukeley (Ashbee 2001, 86; 2005, 113). It is also stressed that after the publication of L.V. Grinsell’s Bronze Age Round Barrows of Kent (1992), D.R.J. Perkins (2004, 76) counted 739 potential round barrow sites in the county. On east Kent’s Chalkland’s southern part there were 356 ring-ditch sites, with another 315 on Thanet. Special barrows, as in Wessex, are absent, but local centres, as at Wingham, Bridge, at Ringlemere and flanking the Wantsum Channel, which separates Thanet from the rest of Kent, have been identified. It is clear that Kent, at the south-eastern end of southern England was, in Neolithic and Bronze Age times, a local centre comparable with the Sussex Downs and Dorset, with, to the west of Wessex, and the great centre around Stonehenge, Devon and Cornwall. It should be remembered that, writing in 1940, Gordon Childe (1947, 143) saw the earlier Bronze Age of Cornwall as a parallel culture rather than an outpost of Wessex society, although Stuart Piggott (1938) had already seen on Farway Down, in Devon, and at Rillaton, elements which
he thought of more at home in Wessex. Later the present writer, with G.C. Dunning (1960), saw the Chalklands of east Kent in terms of its barrows, bronzes and ceramics as a satellite region removed from Wessex. The emergence, however, of the Ringlemere cup with its amber, from its great barrow, reinforces, to some extent, this notion, for the Wessex earlier Bronze Age with its focal monuments, must have been a centrality. Nonetheless, it is emerging that in this string of southern, central, regions there is likely to have been, as at Ringlemere, Hove, Clandon, Devon and Cornwall funerary finery equalling that of Wessex, the pivotal region.

With all the factors enumerated in the previous paragraph Stuart Needham (75-9) has developed the concept of a Channel Bronze Age. This is shown, before all else, by the recurring exotic objects from the barrows of England’s southern coastal strip, from Rillaton to Ringlemere, with a link into the Rheinland, Fritzdorf. Wessex, with Stonehenge and its supportive monuments and barrows, cannot be other than the central, key factor, in such a scheme. Nevertheless, Cornwall and Kent, are the extremities, linked by such phenomena as the Hove Barrow, in Sussex, Clandon in Dorset and the Farway Down complex in Devon, which emerge as of earlier Bronze Age substance. There are, of course, the Fritzdorf and other German cups to consider and thus Needham sees a Channel-Rhein-Frisian network.

Since the discovery of the Bronze Age boat (Ashbee 2005, 135) and the bronzes from Langdon Bay (Coombs 1976; Muckelroy 1981, 281-7) the notion of Channel and North Sea crossings to France and the Rhein estuary has emerged as likely and practical. Thus, before all else, Stuart Needham (75-81) has defined a south coast maritime system. This, taken together with the Channel coastal distribution of the precious cups, and related artefacts, leads him to say that these cups could have been the instruments of propitiatory rites pertaining to sea-going activities. The factors supporting this not unattractive concept are cogent and not unconvincing. Small numbers of modest daggers and pins from deep in the European mainland have been found in Wessex and other graves (ApSimon 1954, 46) while British and Irish flanged axes were conveyed eastwards (Butler 1963, 27-47; N 06, 80, fig. 6). Hilversum urns have for long been thought of as largely of western inspiration (Dunning 1936) and in this context Stuart Needham brings forward a specific biconical urn from Wouldham, in Kent (Cruse and Harrison 1983; Cruse 2007) which is thought to have been the precursor of urn developments in the Low Countries. A further development has been the appearance of Trevisker Ware (ApSimon and Greenfield 1972), hitherto thought of as essentially Cornish, which has been found at Monkton, in Kent, while there is a probable piece from Baston Manor (Philp 2002, 38-9). Across the Channel there is a sandhill find from the Pas-de-Calais (ApSimon and Greenfield 1972, 375) and the Ile Tathou, off the Normandy coast
(Needham, 75). In this context the early Scillonian pottery found in the La Varde passage grave on Guernsey (Kendrick 1928, 113, fig. 41) should be noted. In this particular direction, however, there is the feeling that the nature of a relationship with Armorica, as for example the Wessex I weaponry, may have been overstated and that cultural autonomy was maintained on both sides of the Channel although there may have been occasional exchanges and small-scale migrations (Needham, 2000).

In his exposition of the nature of the Channel Bronze Age, Needham has given considerable weight to the southern English incidence of amber, the fossil resin from the extinct conifer *Pinus Succinifer*. The principal European source is the erstwhile Prussian coast of the Baltic while quantities are thrown up upon the shores of East Anglia, sometimes as blocks the size of building bricks (Taylor 1980, 45). However, it is thought that most of the British amber must be from beyond the North Sea as, with the exception of the Little Cressingham (Norfolk) burial (Thurnam 1871, 454), there is a lack of amber in the east coast prehistoric contexts. It is therefore felt that most of Britain’s amber is from the European source, and that East Anglian amber was a trigger for more from the Baltic. Such amber is likely to have been brought to Britain as blocks and fashioned into dagger pommels, beads, discs and the like in the west.

Stuart Needham concludes his well-grounded view of a Channel Bronze Age (N 06, 75-81), which is, despite its succinct title, better seen as the Channel-Rhein-Frisian network, a term which he uses. Some valuable observations are in the last paragraphs of this section, the axe hoards in coastal locations and the emergence of tin-bronze, which would have led to a demand for tin, as is said, upon a prodigious scale. Tin ores in Britain were limited to Cornwall (Hencken 1932, 158-88; Piggott 1977) and Devon, while in Ireland small amounts are associated with the gold of the Wicklow mountains. Upon the European mainland, there is tin in Bohemia, Brittany, Italy and Spain, while many sources such as in Germany (Clark 1952, 195) may have been worked out. Once found the separation of tin ore from its parent rock was not a too difficult process and thus eventually extraction must have been upon a huge scale (Tylecote 1962, 63-72). That there would have been adequate sea-traffic for transport to southern England is a concluding comment.

It emerges that the cups can be considered as a feature of a specific network with its own particular ideology and organisation, and that Britain is likely to have had various networks which addressed particular aspects of the British Bronze Age’s social structure. Certain axes, particularly those from coastal locations, as in Neolithic times, may have had certain aesthetic, indeed, magical properties and they emerge as an important element within the Channel concept. Socially, the cups were involved in the ritual servicing of a maritime exchange organization which would have held the Channel-Rhein-Frisian network together.
The Wessex phenomenon, based upon Stonehenge and its surroundings, as defined by Piggott (1938), was a society apart and the coastal areas, Kent, Sussex, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall would thus have developed their own rituals, involving the cups, as they were geared to the mechanics of maritime exchange.

From all that has come to pass in this notable publication which begins with the crushed Ringlemere gold cup, from Kent, we are behoven to look at the cherished patterns of Bronze Age development anew.

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