
The Ringlemere Cup

Precious Cups and the Beginning of the Channel Bronze Age

Editors

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Contributors

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Illustrations by

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Front cover: Cups (from left to right) from Saint-Adrien (no. 8),
Ringlemere (no. 1), Farway (no. 14) and Hove (no. 11);
design Stephen Crummy

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Foreword

The pursuit of a context for such a rare thing as an Early Bronze Age gold cup was a must. Little did we realise how rich a site at Ringlemere the cup was signposting, moreover one previously unknown. Indeed, not just an unknown site, but an unknown prehistoric monument complex with the first secure henge to be recognized in Kent and the additional reward of an overlying Anglo-Saxon cemetery, itself of considerable significance.

Initial thoughts of a modest exploratory cutting to see whether an immediate context for the artefact could be found were overtaken by greater ambition even before a spade went in as it emerged from geophysical survey that the cup lay within a large ditched monument. Trench 1 in the spring of 2002 revealed not only the basal structure of a mound, but also the richest assemblage of Grooved Ware, associated lithics and features yet known from Kent. With the threat of the plough biting ever deeper into the surviving intact deposits, the scope of the campaign was scaled up again. Total excavation of the upstanding part of the monument became the only sensible option.

However, scaling up a fieldwork campaign always means lengthening the delay before final reporting on the results. So, rather than allow the detailed study of the cup and its parallels to languish for longer than necessary, we have decided on a bipartite report structure for the prehistoric evidence. Even so, a hard line has not been drawn between star find and excavated evidence; this project was above all about seizing a rare opportunity to place an iconic object in multi-level context. Five years on from its discovery, we can already point to a specific context on the site that we think the cup came from and we can begin to relate this to a longer site history involving a henge monument and a barrow. So we make no apology for outlining that history even though some aspects of it are necessarily provisional. In addition to a future companion volume on the full array of prehistoric evidence, it is already apparent that the Anglo-Saxon cemetery merits its own detailed publication.

But the focus of this volume is the find that started it all off – the Gold Cup... .

Summaries

In 2001 an Early Bronze Age gold cup was discovered by Cliff Bradshaw, a metal-detectorist, at Ringlemere Farm, Woodnesborough, in east Kent. It belongs to a well known series of 'precious' cups made of gold, silver, amber and shale, and has much in common with the celebrated gold example from Rillaton, Cornwall. The find set in motion a campaign of survey work and excavation on the site; preliminary results are given here.

The cup was found to have come from a circular ditched monument (M1), originally over 50m in diameter. The monument is interpreted, in its original form, as a Late Neolithic henge with an external bank, a single entrance and a central rectilinear timber structure; a mound was later added to the interior. Henges with comparable diameters, orientations, central structures or added mounds are discussed. No evidence for prehistoric burials has been found at Ringlemere M1, but a precise context for the cup has been deduced, placing its deposition with a contemporary amber pendant, one of two amber objects from the site, at an advanced phase of the site's life.

Fieldwork has also demonstrated the presence of other monuments clustered around M1 and occupying gently sloping ground near the headwaters of the Durlock Stream. This volume gives a synthesis of current knowledge of the elusive Neolithic and Early Bronze Age monuments of east Kent. It also contains a summary of the long sequence of activity revealed by excavation, including intensive Grooved Ware occupation preceding and/or contemporary with the henge, and much later use of the denuded mound as a focus for an early Anglo-Saxon cemetery.

The 15 other precious cups from north-west Europe are reviewed afresh in terms of form and contexts largely on the basis of new study. Their stylistic and technological backgrounds are elicited and their function argued to be highly specialized. Despite the presence of common features, most of the cups are seen to be individual creations, probably the products of their respective regions of discovery. This has significant implications for what the cups represent and how they relate to growing waterborne exchange along an axis from the English Channel to the lower Rhine and the Frisian coast. The cups are interpreted as key elements in a ritual package that helped 'service' a specific maritime contact network operating in this zone.

One of the key materials being exchanged westwards within this network was amber, highly prized for cosmological reasons in southern Britain and Brittany. While amber was clearly much sought in Wessex for the manufacture of spacer-plate necklaces and other ornaments, it is argued that southern coastal communities were those responsible for supply of the precious raw material. A range of distinctions is brought out between the two regions – Wessex proper and the southern English littoral – to demonstrate that, although articulating with one another,

they had rather different identities, craft skills and ritual preoccupations. Ringlemere adds further evidence to help undermine the joint fallacies that all Early Bronze Age valuables stem from a Wessex-led ideology and that a 'Wessex culture' or 'Wessex series' is a meaningful term for the varied ritual and material expressions in Early Bronze Age southern Britain.

Resumée

En 2001, une coupe en or du Bronze Ancien a été découverte par Cliff Bradshaw, au détecteur à métaux, à Ringlemere Farm, Woodnesborough, dans l'est du Kent. Elle appartient à une série bien connue de coupes 'précieuses' en or, argent, ambre et schiste bitumineux et présente de nombreux points communs avec le célèbre exemplaire en or de Rillaton, Cornouailles. La découverte a été à l'origine d'une campagne de prospection et fouille du site dont les résultats préliminaires sont présentés ici.

Il s'est avéré que la coupe provenait d'un monument circulaire ceint d'un fossé (M1) d'un diamètre de plus de 50m à l'origine. Le monument a été interprété comme un 'henge' (cercle) du Néolithique final, doté d'un talus externe, d'une entrée unique et d'une structure centrale rectiligne, en bois; un tertre a été ajouté postérieurement, à l'intérieur. La discussion porte ici sur les 'hengés' de diamètres et orientations comparables, à aménagements internes ou tertres ajoutés. À Ringlemere M1, aucune sépulture préhistorique n'a été mise en évidence, mais le contexte précis de la coupe a pu être déduit, associant son dépôt à celui d'un pendentif contemporain en ambre, un des deux objets en ambre du site, à une phase avancée de l'occupation du site.

Les fouilles ont aussi révélé la présence d'autres structures groupées autour de M1, occupant un terrain légèrement en pente proche des sources de la Durlock. La publication présente une synthèse des connaissances actuelles sur les monuments assez insaisissables du Néolithique et du Bronze Ancien, dans l'est du Kent. Elle résume également la longue séquence d'activités révélée par les fouilles, avec une forte occupation pendant de la culture des 'Grooved Ware', antérieure et/ou contemporaine du 'henge', puis, beaucoup plus tard, une utilisation du tertre érodé comme centre d'un cimetière anglo-saxon précoce.

La typologie et les contextes des quinze autres coupes précieuses du nord-ouest de l'Europe font l'objet d'une actualisation fondée principalement sur de nouvelles études. Styles et techniques sont clarifiés et la fonction de ces coupes s'avère hautement spécialisée. Bien qu'elles présentent des caractéristiques communes, la plupart d'entre elles sont des créations uniques, probablement produites dans leurs zones de découverte. Les implications sont considérables pour le statut de ces coupes et leur lien avec l'expansion des échanges maritimes le long d'un axe reliant la Manche, l'embouchure du Rhin et les

côtes frisonnes. Les coupes sont considérées comme des éléments clefs d'un mobilier rituel qui aide à l'instauration d'un réseau spécifique d'échanges maritimes dans cette région.

Au sein de ce réseau, un des principaux matériaux acheminés vers l'ouest était l'ambre, hautement prisé pour des raisons cosmologiques dans le sud de la Grande-Bretagne et en Bretagne. Bien que l'ambre ait été clairement recherché dans le Wessex surtout pour la fabrication d'espaceurs pour colliers et d'autres ornements, il est proposé que ce soient les communautés installées sur la côte sud qui soient responsables de la fourniture de la précieuse matière brute. Un ensemble de différences est mis en évidence entre les deux régions – le Wessex proprement dit et le littoral sud de l'Angleterre – qui montre que, bien que liées l'une à l'autre, ces deux régions ont des identités, des savoir-faire et des préoccupations rituelles assez différents. Ringlemere apporte des arguments supplémentaires pour dénoncer les liens erronés qui associent tous les objets de valeur du Bronze Ancien à une idéologie orchestrée par le Wessex et qui font de la 'culture du Wessex' ou des 'séries du Wessex' un terme qui englobe la variété des expressions rituelles et matérielles du Bronze Ancien du sud de la Grande-Bretagne.

Catherine Louboutin

Zusammenfassung

Im Jahr 2001 entdeckte Cliff Bradshaw, ein Sondengeher, in der Nähe der Ringlemere Farm bei Woodnesborough in Ost Kent eine frühbronzezeitliche Goldtasse. Sie gehört zu einer bekannten Serie solcher 'kostbarer' Tassen aus Gold, Silber, Bernstein oder Schieferton und hat viel gemeinsam mit dem berühmten Goldexemplar aus Rillaton, Cornwall. Der Ringlemere Fund führte zu einer Kampagne von Geländesurveys und Ausgrabungen; vorläufige Ergebnisse werden hier präsentiert.

Es stellte sich heraus, daß die Tasse aus einem runden, von einem Graben umgebenden Monument (M1) stammte, das ursprünglich einen Durchmesser von über 50m gehabt hatte. In seiner originalen Form wird dieses Monument als spätneolithisches Kreismonument ('henge') mit vorgelagertem Graben, einem einzigen Eingang und einer zentralen, rechteckigen Holzstruktur interpretiert; zu einem späteren Zeitpunkt wurde im Inneren ein Hügel hinzugefügt. Kreismonumente mit vergleichbaren Durchmessern, Ausrichtungen, Zentralstrukturen und hinzugefügten Hügeln werden hier diskutiert. Es konnte keinerlei Nachweis für prähistorische Bestattungen bei Ringlemere M1 erbracht werden, aber es war möglich einen präzisen Kontext für die Tasse zu folgern. Dieser plazierte ihre Deponierung, die zusammen mit einem gleichdatierenden Bernsteinanhänger – einem von zwei Bernsteinobjekten vom Grabungsgelände – erfolgte, in eine fortgeschrittene Phase des Fundplatzes.

Weitere Untersuchungen zeigten, daß andere Monumente, um M1 herumgruppiert und auch auf dem leicht abfallenden Terrain in der Nähe des Oberlaufs des Durlock Baches, vorhanden waren. Der vorliegende Band enthält eine Synthese des gegenwärtigen Wissenstandes der schwer fassbaren neolithischen und frühbronzezeitlichen Monumente in Ost Kent. Die Publikation beinhaltet außerdem eine Zusammenfassung der langen Aktivitätssequenz, die die Ausgrabung offenlegte, einschließlich der intensiven 'Grooved Ware' Besiedlung, die dem Kreismonument voranging und/oder gleichzeitig mit ihm stattfand, sowie der viel späteren Nutzung des inzwischen stark verflachten Hügels als Fokus eines frühangelsächsischen Friedhofes.

Die 15 anderen 'kostbaren' Tassen aus Nordwesteuropa werden im Hinblick auf ihre Form und Fundzusammenhänge besprochen, auf der Basis einer weitgehenden, neuen Studie. Ihr stilistischer und technologischer Hintergrund wird eruiert und es wird argumentiert, daß ihre Funktion hochspezifisch war. Trotz des Vorhandenseins gemeinsamer Züge werden die meisten Tassen als individuelle Kreationen angesehen, vermutlich als Produkte der jeweiligen Region, in der sie entdeckt wurden. Dies hat signifikante Implikationen für den Bedeutungsgehalt der Tassen und für die Frage wie sie mit dem wachsenden Austausch auf dem Wasserweg entlang einer Axe vom Ärmelkanal zum Niederrhein und der friesischen Küste im Zusammenhang stehen. Die Tassen werden interpretiert als Schlüsselemente in einem Ritualpaket, das half ein spezifisches maritimes Kontaktnetz, das in dieser Zone bestand, zu 'erhalten'.

Eines der Schlüsselmaterialien, die innerhalb dieses Netzwerkes nach Westen ausgetauscht wurden, war Bernstein, der aus kosmologischen Gründen im Süden Englands und in der Bretagne hochgeschätzt war. Während Bernstein offensichtlich in Wessex hochgefragt war für die Herstellung von Schiebern für Halsketten und von anderen Schmuckstücken, wird hier argumentiert, daß Gemeinschaften an der Südküste für die Versorgung mit dem wertvollen Rohmaterial zuständig waren. Eine Reihe von Unterschieden zwischen den beiden Regionen – Wessex im eigentlichen Sinne und der südenglischen Küstenzone – wird herausgearbeitet, um darzulegen, daß sie trotz aller Interaktion eher verschiedene Identitäten, Handwerkstraditionen und rituelle Glaubens- und Ausdrucksformen besaßen. Ringlemere hilft weither dabei die Trugschlüsse, daß alle frühbronzezeitlichen Wertobjekte aus einer Wessex-orientierten Ideologie stammten und dass 'Wessexkultur' und 'Wessexserie' aussagefähige Begriffe für die vielfältigen rituellen und materiellen Ausdrucksformen der Frühbronzezeit im Süden Englands und in Wales seien, zu unterminieren.

Sonja Marzinzik

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