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One British Thing: A Fifth-Century Ceramic Beaker

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Abstract A post-Roman folded beaker allows us to see traditional Romano-British material culture and material practices continuing into the fifth century and helps us understand the problem of the blanket labeling of all objects made after ca. 400 as "Anglo-Saxon."

Archaeologists uncovered this little handmade pot, only 18 centimeters high, next to the head of a dead adult buried in the first half of the fifth century in a cemetery at Alton, in Hampshire. A few of Alton's later graves contained spectacular objects—swords, shields, fancy disc brooches, and an elaborate silver, gold-gilt, and garnet belt buckle[1]—but the bulk of its burials, which date to a few generations after the withdrawal of the Roman state from Britain, included only a few simple objects or nothing at all.[2] This pot, which is from one of these early graves, was described as a "pedestal pot" by the late, great ceramics expert J. N. L. Myers, and he argued that it had been made by Jutes, one the peoples identified by the Venerable Bede in the eighth century as having taken part in the *adventus Saxonum*, "the coming of the English" to Britain.[3] Although the cemetery's excavator, Vera Evison, doubted the pot's Jutish antecedents, she nonetheless concurred that it, the cemetery it was found in, and the people buried within it were all Anglo-Saxon.[4]

Scholars not only apply the ethnic label "Anglo-Saxon" to this pot but use it as a matter of course to describe all handmade ceramics produced in Britain in the fifth and early sixth centuries, and these ceramics, in turn, are employed to distinguish early medieval burials and settlement sites from Roman-period ones and to identify communities of Anglo-Saxon immigrants and their descendants. But a long, hard think about the little pot from Alton highlights the difficulties (tautological and otherwise) that arise when we ascribe ethnic identities to things and then turn around and use those things to determine the ethnicities of their makers and users.

There is no doubt that Myers and Evison were right in thinking that the Alton pot was produced and buried in the post-Roman period. Most ceramics used in Britain under Roman rule were mass-produced, wheel-thrown, and kiln-fired, and the

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[1] Vera Evison, *An Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Alton, Hampshire* (Stroud, 1988), 18–20, 51; George Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art* (Oxford, 1980), 54–58 and plates 5–7.

[2] Evison, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Alton*, 37–38, 41–45.

[3] J. N. L. Myers, "The Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, no. 56 (1970): 145–74, fig. 7.3; Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds. and trans., *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969), 51.

[4] Evison, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Alton*, 25.

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Figure 1—Post-Roman beaker found in a fifth-century grave in Alton, Hampshire. Image courtesy of Hampshire Cultural Trust.

tempers added to the clay of these pots were inorganic rather than organic.[5] This pot, on the other hand, like the vast majority of pots available in Britain in the first couple of hundred years after Rome's fall, was handmade and organic tempered and had been fired in a bonfire or a clamp.[6] Yet none of these things make the Alton pot "Anglo-Saxon." Sometime in the decades after 400, in the aftermath of the economic implosion that accompanied imperial withdrawal, professional craftsmen in Britain could no longer make a living,[7] and the skills and technologies associated with their trades disappeared with them. One of the results is that people ceased to have access to the kinds of mass-produced, newly made containers that had until

[5] Jeremy Evans, "Forms of Knowledge: Changing Technologies of Romano-British Pottery," in *The Oxford Handbook of Roman Britain*, ed. Martin Millett, Louise Revell, and Alison Moore (Oxford, 2016), 510–31. Although some pottery from the early fifth century used organic tempers, it is now understood that vegetable tempers only came to dominate in England from the early sixth century on. H. Hamerow, Y. Hollevoet, and A. Vince, "Migration Period Settlement and 'Anglo-Saxon' Pottery from Flanders," *Medieval Archaeology*, no. 38 (1994): 1–18.

[6] Keith J. Fitzpatrick-Matthews and Robin Fleming, "The Perils of Periodization: Roman Ceramics in Britain after 400 CE," *Fragments*, no. 5 (2016): 1–33, at 12.

[7] For explanations as to why this happened, see Jeremy Evans, "The End of Roman Pottery in the North," in *The Late Roman Transition in the North*, ed. Tony Wilmott and Peter Wilson, British Archaeological Reports (BAR) British Series 299 (Oxford, 2000), 39–46, at 41; Mark Whyman, *Late Roman Britain in Transition, AD 300–500: A Ceramic Perspective from East Yorkshire* (Ph.D. diss., University of York, 2001), 357–62.

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recently cluttered their houses.[8] Another is that since most people had purchased their pots, the knowledge and skills needed to throw a pot on a wheel or fire it in a kiln were not things that most households possessed.[9] Nonetheless, people native to Britain continued to need pots, so it does not necessarily follow that pots made in less sophisticated ways in the aftermath of the economic collapse were the handiwork of people new to Britain.[10] Indeed, anyone familiar with late Roman pottery will immediately see that this pedestal pot is not "Germanic" in the least but is rather a not very successful, handmade version of a Roman-period folded beaker, made by someone without the technologies or know-how of Roman-period potters, who had produced folded beakers by the wagonload. This beaker was fashioned, nonetheless, by someone who not only knew what a Roman beaker was supposed to look like, but wanted one.[11]

Beakers like this often served in the Roman period as grave gifts, and archaeologists have recovered hundreds from cemeteries, where they were often placed, as was the one at Alton, next to the heads of the dead.[12] In life, these beakers were used for wine or beer,[13] so their appearance in cemeteries may hint at the feasting and drinking that took place during the Roman period at the gravesite. Beakers were then widely available, so mourners would not have to be particularly well-off to procure one for a funeral. Still, there are hints that people economized when

[8] On the much smaller-scale but continued production of Roman wares into the fifth century, see the articles in James Gerrard, ed., *Romano-British Pottery in the Fifth Century*, special issue, *Internet Archaeology* 41 (2016), https://doi.org/10.11141/ia.41.9; Fitzpatrick-Mathews and Fleming, "Perils of Periodization." For older ideas that all Roman-style pottery ceased to be made after 400 CE, see M. G. Fulford, "Pottery Production and Trade at the End of Roman Britain: The Case against Continuity," in *The End of Roman Britain*, ed. P. J. Casey, BAR British Series 71 (Oxford, 1979), 120–32; Evans, "End of Roman Pottery in the North," 39–46; Bryan Ward-Perkins, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization* (Oxford, 2005). For arguments that all pottery produced after 400 CE was based on the household-centered craft traditions of Germanic settlers, see J. N. L. Myers, *The English Settlements* (Oxford, 1986), 63–73.

[9] Nicholas J. Cooper, "Searching for the Blank Generation: Consumer Choice in Roman and Post-Roman Britain," in *Roman Imperialism: Post-Colonial Perspectives*, ed. Jane Webster and Nicholas Cooper (Leicester, 1999), 85–98, at 85.

[10] Fitzpatrick-Matthews and Fleming, "Perils of Periodization."

[11] For the New Forest beakers that were common in this part of Hampshire during the late Roman period, see P. A. Tyers, "New Forest Slipped Wares," *Potsherd: Atlas of Roman Pottery*, http://potsherd.net/atlas/Ware/NFCC.html. For a general discussion of deskilling in the late Roman period across the West, see Tiziano Mannoni, "The Transmission of Craft Techniques according to the Principles of Material Culture: Continuity and Rupture," in *Technology in Transition, AD 300–650*, ed. Luke Lavan, Enrico Zanini, and Alexander C. Sarantis (Leiden, 2008), xli–lx. For three examples of deskilling in post-Roman Britain and the material consequences of deskilling, see Robin Fleming, "Recycling in Britain after the Fall of Rome's Metal Economy," *Past and Present* 217, no. 1 (November 2012): 3–45; Fitzpatrick-Matthews and Fleming, "Perils of Periodization"; Robin Fleming, "Old Buildings, Building Material, and the Death of Recycling in Post-Roman Britain," in *Recycling and the Ancient Economy*, ed. Andrew Wilson (Oxford, forthcoming).

[12] Robert A. Philpott, *Burial Practices in Roman Britain: A Survey of Grave Treatment and Furnishing, AD 43–410*, BAR British Series 219 (Oxford, 1991), 103–14; Edward Biddulph, "Last Orders: Choosing Pottery for Funerals in Roman Essex," *Oxford Journal of Archaeology* 24, no. 1 (February 2005), 23–45, at 34, 36–37.

[13] D. C. Steures, "How Dark Coloured Drinking Sets from Trier Were Used," *Babesch, Bulletin Antieke Beschaving*, no. 77 (2002): 175–79; H. E. M. Cool, *Eating and Drinking in Roman Britain* (Cambridge, 2006), 147–51.

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they could: beakers found in graves are often "seconds," suggesting that less-than-perfect wares were available at special bargain prices for just such occasions.[14]

The appearance of this beaker in a grave dug only a generation or two after Rome's withdrawal from Britain suggests that people burying at Alton, although they were no longer able to procure traditional, mass-produced, Roman-style pottery, were nonetheless familiar with the late Roman tradition of beaker burial and the rituals that accompanied it. The morphology of this pot, its placement in the grave, and its referencing of age-old traditions tell a very different story from the technologies that had been used to produce it. They suggest that Roman-style pots were still being made in the early fifth century, either by people who knew a little about potting, perhaps because their families had once made a living at it, or by amateurs for use in their own households. These things argue that the people who put this beaker in the ground were participating in ritual acts and engaging with material culture in ways that indigenous people across lowland Britain had been doing for centuries.

Once we see this little pot for what it is—an awkwardly fashioned, folded beaker, handmade and used by people who had very particular ideas about what pots should look like and how they should be used—we begin to see that other objects buried with Alton's earliest dead hint that at least some people here continued to engage with material culture in ways that people in the neighborhood had been doing for a very long time, even if whole classes of once common objects were rapidly disappearing because of the collapse of the Roman state and economy in Britain. One young woman buried at Alton, for example, wore a brooch on each shoulder, a fashion not followed by women in the fourth century.[15] Her brooches, however, were made in the Quoit-brooch style,[16] which, much like the pot, was at one time identified as a Jutish style[17] but is now recognized as a category of fifth-century metalwork that evolved out of late Roman provincial metalworking traditions. Objects made in this style were the handiwork of craftsmen who are better described as post-Roman than "Anglo-Saxon," since they are related to tastes and technologies found within the empire rather than outside of it.[18] Another of Alton's early burials, this one a cremation, employed an old Roman cooking pot as a receptacle for the dead person's ashes.[19] There was a long tradition, in the Roman period, of using kitchen pots in exactly this way.

The post-Roman folded beaker allows us to see traditional Romano-British material culture and material practices continuing into the fifth century, and it helps us understand the problem of the blanket labeling of all objects made after ca. 400 as "Anglo-Saxon." Categorizing pots in this way has been especially pernicious, because ceramics are one of the few durable artifacts that survive from the period, and they are often our only way of seeing the people who lived in post-fall Britain.

[14] Biddulph, "Last Orders," 37.

[15] Lindsay Allason-Jones, *Women in Roman Britain*, 2nd ed. (York, 2005), 121.

[16] Evison, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Alton*, 11–12, 74.

[17] Reginald A. Smith, "Jutish Finds in Kent," *British Museum Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (March 1936): 131–32; Sonia Chadwick Hawkes, "The Jutish Style A: A Study of Germanic Animal Art in Southern England in the Fifth Century A.D.," *Archaeologia*, no. 98 (1961): 29–74.

[18] Peter Inker, "Technology as Active Material Culture: The Quoit-brooch Style," *Medieval Archaeology*, no. 44 (2000): 25–52, at 49–51; Seiichi Suzuki, *The Quoit Brooch Style and Anglo-Saxon Settlements* (Woodbridge, 2000), 109.

[19] Evison, *Anglo-Saxon Cemetery at Alton*, 25.

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Because pottery dating to the fifth and early sixth centuries, including the Alton beaker, is labeled "Anglo-Saxon," the people using it become "Anglo-Saxons" as well. The result is that several million people whose parents and grandparents had lived in Britain under Rome are erased from history.[20] Imposing ethnic labels like "Anglo-Saxon" on pots not only makes the vast majority of people living in fifth-century Britain invisible but it forecloses the very real possibility that the material culture and lifeways developing in Britain over the course of the fifth and sixth centuries were the handiwork not just of new peoples moving into Britain from the edges of the Roman world but of the many more individuals whose families had been there all along.

Over the course of the next couple of centuries, indigenes and newcomers together would build a new material world and forge a new identity, and their descendants, as the writings of Bede make clear, would eventually come to think of themselves as English. But as with most identities, this concoction was not rooted in birth or blood, and far from being a timeless, monolithic thing, it was historically constructed and advanced and maintained over the generations by shared material culture and material practices that evolved over the first couple of centuries of the Middle Ages.[21] But the "Anglo-Saxons" were nowhere to be found in the fifth century because they had not yet invented themselves.

[20] Millett estimates between 3.3 million and 3.66 million: Martin Millett, *The Romanization of Britain: An Essay in Archaeological Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1990), 181–86. Richard Hingley's estimate is between 2.5 million and 3.6 million: Richard Hingley, "The Roman Landscape of Britain: From Hoskins to Today," in *Prehistoric and Roman Landscapes: Landscape History after Hoskins*, ed. Richard Hingley and Andrew Fleming (Macclesfield, 2007), 101–13, at 110). And David Mattingly's estimate is 2.5 million: David J. Mattingly, *Imperialism, Power and Identity: Experiencing the Roman Empire* (Oxford, 2011), 219. More recent estimates, based on the work of the Roman Rural Settlement project, suggest that population numbers peaked in Britain in the second century rather than in the fourth, and that we may need to scale back our population estimates of the late Roman period to something on the order of 1.75–2.25 million: Michael Fulford and Marty Allen, "Introduction: Population and the Dynamics of Change in Roman South-Eastern England," in *Agriculture and Industry in South-Eastern Roman Britain*, ed. David Bird (Oxford, 2017), 1–14, at 5–13.

[21] Siân Jones, *The Archaeology of Ethnicity: Constructing Identities in the Past and Present* (London, 1997).

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