

Pots, Females and Food

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Thirteen graves at the Migration Period burial-ground Hamre, middle Sweden, contain ceramic pots. The technical features of these pots are related to the grave-ritual. Cooking or storage pots as well as table-pots had been used. Independent of these qualities, the pots had been used as bone-containers in the male graves, while in the female graves they had been placed on the pyre, possibly containing food, and afterwards deposited as sherds. In this way the female role of housewife was stressed.

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The burial-ground at Hamre, Västmanland, Sweden, was in use during the Migration Period, about 400–700 AD. It consists of a loose agglomeration of 32 graves (Welinder 1989; 1990).

The earliest grave is a flat stone-setting, where a woman was buried after having been cremated together with i.a. a comb and a glass beaker. Figure 1 presents the succeeding development of the burial-ground in two tentative steps. During the Migration Period the burial ritual in middle Sweden changed from depositing the cremated and cleaned bones in a container inside a stone-setting with a kerb, to scattering them together with charcoal and soot underneath an earthen mound. This is the basis of Figure 1.

A ceramic pot may be found in the grave in both of the above cases. Either the pot was used as the sole bone-container for the cleaned bones, or some of the bones were gathered in the pot while the rest were scattered on the ground around it, or there were just a few haphazard potsherds deposited with the bones. In any case, at the Hamre burial-ground few of the pots can be reconstructed beyond the bottom part of them (Fig. 2). Most of the thirteen pots, one present in each of thirteen graves, cannot be regarded as anything but a bunch of potsherds.

This essay will deal with the use of these pots in the grave-ritual applied by the society that built the mounds and stone-settings at Hamre. The use will be inferred from a dis-

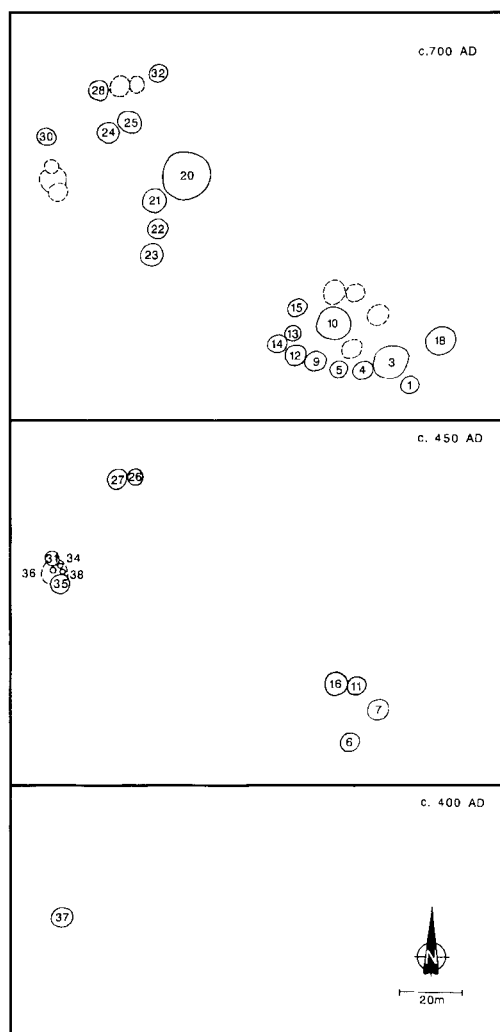


Fig. 1. The tentative chronological development of the Hamre burial-ground (from Welinder 1990).



Fig. 2. Partly reconstructed pots from the Hamre burial-ground (photo Sune Bergström, Västerås).

cussion about the pots themselves as well as their context.

Few interesting attributes can be recorded

for the pots in a reliable way. Most of them concern technical features, while a few concern the shape of the bottom part of the pots

Tab. 1. Technical and morphological features of the pots from the Hamre burial-ground (for grave nos., see Fig. 1).

Grave no.	I	II	III	IV	V	VI	VII	VIII
1	1	1	1	0	1	1	1	1
3	1	1	0	1	1	-	0	1
9	0	0	1	1	1	0	1	1
10	1	1	0	1	1	0	1	0
12	1	0	0	0	0	1	-	-
13	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	1
18	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0
21	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0
28	1	1	1	0	1	1	0	0
32	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
34	0	0	1	0	0	-	0	0
35	0	0	1	1	1	0	0	1
37	1	1	0	-	0	-	-	-

I = maximum grain size in the temper less than 3 mm

II = maximum proportion of temper less than 16 %

III = proportion of clay particles (< .002 mm) in the clay more than 40 %

IV = wall thickness less than 8 mm

V = polished outer surface

VI = grey/black ware colour obtained during the firing

VII = protruding bottom

VIII = bottom diameter more than 12 cm

(Tab. 1). Other morphological attributes are of little interest, since they can be recorded only for one or two pots due to the fragmentary state of the pots. Certainly a few other attributes concerning the temper of the pots could be added. This has not been done, although the composition of the temper will soon be discussed.

The selected attributes (Tab. 1) divide the pots into three discrete groups processed by a cluster analysis based on the simple matching coefficient and the UPGMA algorithm by Sokal et al. 1973 (Fig. 3).

The pot in the earliest grave of the burial-ground is singled out as unique by the multivariate statistical analysis (Group A in Fig. 3). In addition, this is the only pot partly tempered with plant material.

In this pot as well as in about half of the other pots a little chamotte and occasionally a crushed fire-cracked cooking-stone has been added to the temper, which otherwise consists of crushed primary bedrock stones. Thus an idea by Birgitta Hulthén is demonstrated (Hulthén 1987). The woman (?) who moulded the pot brought life to the dead clay with a sherd from an old pot, and assigned it to its role in the household with a cooking-stone from her (?) hearth.

The rest of the pots are separated into two groups (groups B–C in Fig. 3). The two pots assumed to belong to the early stage of the burial-ground (cf. Fig. 1) are both found in group B. Thus, it can tentatively be suggested that the grouping performed by the statistical analysis corresponds to a chronological subdivision. In any case, there is more to be seen in the pots and their context.

The statistical grouping in Figure 3 is mainly based on technical features of the pots. These can be isolated and transformed into a quality scale. In the process a conventional view of low and high quality in pottery is applied, i.e. thin-walled, polished, and black-fired pots made from a dense clay with a fine-grained temper are regarded as high quality. Thus a scale of quality is formed (Tab. 2). However, the quality scale is not a scale of

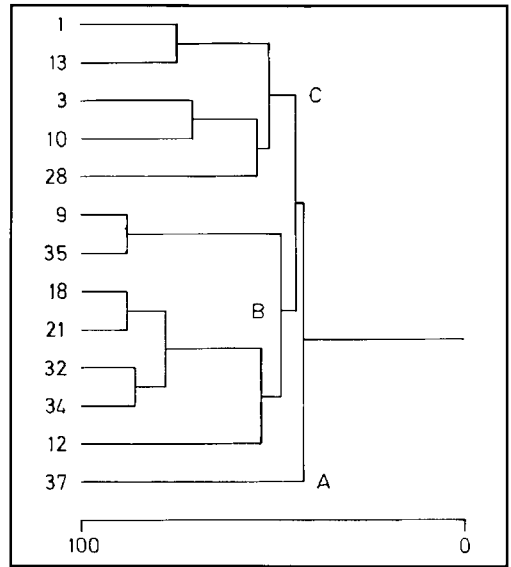


Fig. 3. Cluster analysis of the pots from the Hamre burial-ground (cf. Tab. 1).

poor or skilled craftsmanship. It is reasonable to suggest that the red-fired, porous pots at one end served as cooking pots and storage pots, while the polished, dense pots at the other end served as table-pots. Skillful hand-craft is displayed in adapting technology to the intended functions of the finished pots.

Not surprisingly, the quality scale and the suggested functions of the pots correspond closely to the grouping of the pots in Figure 3 (column 2 in Tab. 2). It can also be seen (column 3 in Tab. 2) that when a cooking or storage pot is used in the grave, it has been used as a bone-container. The table-pots had either been used in the same way, or they had been placed on the pyre and after the cremation moved to the grave as a few sherds. It is notable that there is no total correlation between these two ways of using the pot and the suggested functions of the pots. The point of the grave-ritual does not seem to have been to remove a pot from a special place or function within the household for use in a special way within the ritual.

Another idea can be suggested, but before that it can en passant be mentioned that there is no relation between the occurrence of high-quality pots and prestigious artifacts like deco-

Tab. 2. Technical quality and grave-ritual context of the pots at the Hamre burial-ground (for grave nos., see Fig. 1).

Grave no.	I	II	III	IV	V	VI
1	.83	C	X	–	M	–
3	.80	C	–	X	F	X
28	.80	C	X	–	–	–
10	.67	C	–	X	–	–
37	.60	A	–	X	F	X
9	.50	B	X	–	M	–
13	.50	C	–	X	F	X
35	.50	B	–	X	F	–
12	.33	B	X	–	–	–
18	.33	B	X	–	M	–
34	.20	B	X	–	–	–
21	.17	B	X	–	I	–
32	.17	B	X	–	–	–

I = quality index for the pots (= the proportion of present states among columns 1-6 in Tab. 1)

II = group according to Figure 3

III = complete pot used as bone-container

IV = potsherds

V = sex determination from the burnt bones (det. Berit J. Sellevold, Oslo, and Tarja Formisto, Solna) or from the artifact contents of the grave according to Welinder 1990

VI = the presence of burnt bread (graves no. 3, 13) or a glass beaker (grave no. 37)

rative dress ornaments and glass beakers. It is, however, obvious that in the male graves the pots are used as bone-containers, while in the female graves the pots are present as a few sherds from the pyre. This is valid for all graves with a pot and a suggested sex determination (columns 3–5 in Tab. 2). The only infant grave with a pot follows the male custom.

Thus the pots have quite different meanings in the female and male grave-rituals. In the male ritual the pot was introduced after the pyre had died down; it was a container for all or some of the cremated bones and was moved to the stone-setting or mound at the burial-ground, possibly after the bones had been cleaned.

In the female grave-ritual the pot was placed on the pyre and burned together with the deceased. It was one of the material symbols that identified the dead woman to the participants in the ritual. In these graves also burnt bread and a fragment of a glass beaker have been noted (column 6 in Tab. 2). Some of the women were laid on the pyre in the role of keeper and distributor of food and drink with-

in the household. The inscription on a runic stone at Fläckebo in the same province as the Hamre burial-ground, though some centuries later, comes to mind:

The honest farmer Holmgöt erected this stone after Odendisa, his wife

Never will the Hassmyra farm see a better housewife govern the farm

Balle the Red carved these runes

To Sigmund Odendisa was a true sister

Neither the size and shape nor the manufacturing techniques and functions of the ceramic pots at the Hamre burial-ground can unambiguously be related to the grave-ritual, due to a lack of data and a lack of correlations among the relevant data, respectively. On the other hand, the context of the pots may be related to a gender-specific grave-ritual. From the context a meaning may be attached to the presence of a pot in the female grave-ritual. Thus, this essay can be regarded as an exercise in contextual archaeology: it is not the attributes of the artifacts but their context that suggests the meaning.

English revised by Laura Wrang.

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