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RE-THINKING THE IRON AGE

*J D Hill**

Introduction

The Iron Age is boring, particularly when compared to earlier periods of prehistory, which seem stimulating and exciting. This common undergraduate reaction highlights a gulf within British approaches in Later Prehistory between Iron Age and Neolithic/Bronze Age studies in aims, assumptions and language. Although both experienced upheavals during the 1960's only the latter lost its innocence (Clarke 1973), participating in, and transformed by, the theoretical debates of the last two decades. I want to explore what lies behind the split, arguing that Iron Age studies can only be revitalised by a colonisation of ideas from earlier prehistory. Such a shift in perception is vital if we are to make full use of the large data base available to Iron Age archaeology; a record far richer and more suited to discuss many of the general issues current in Neolithic studies. Central to this aim is the play around the theme of *difference*. The past is usually written as either *same* or *other* (Ricoeur 1984; Thomas 1988). The Neolithic is characteristically different, other and consequently problematic. In contrast the Iron Age is safe, 'Celtic', unproblematic and 'familiar' (eg Burl 1981, 212; Miles 1986, 55). But is it?

It is essential to concentrate on how prehistoric periods have been visualised, to expose the rarely articulated assumptions behind archaeologists' work, and thus establish a reflexive, self critical archaeology (Shanks and Tilley 1987). This is less a transcendental reflection, more a critical examination of our own discipline's history. I would argue that Iron Age archaeologists should look closely at recent developments in Neolithic studies where such notions of ideology, structuralism, structured deposition, and context, have provided powerful new approaches to understand the archaeological record. Yet this is not to blindly prescribe these methods, terminologies or approaches; rather it is to adopt the frame of mind which arises when, attempting to use the archaeological record to tell as much about the past on its own, we are confronted by a very different past than that which our common-sense expects or allows. This has not been a characteristic of Iron Age archaeology.

The need for a more critical archaeology has come to the fore in Rowlands' critique of the Modernist and Eurocentric fantasies in Later Prehistory (Rowlands 1986, 1987). That we have assumed or imposed capitalist modes of production into prehistory, and have created a vision of *our* past as always sharing those unique characteristics we ascribe to modern Europe. A European past in which our modernist, historically specific values and common sense notions apply – a familiar past.

For the archaeological record to challenge the imposition of such a past means recognising both its own difference and its ability to speak about the whole of past reality, not just about subsistence and economy. Archaeology should not be an exercise in narcissistic infatuation, only amounting to a projection of present concerns onto the past. The archaeological record is often sufficiently complete to enable a dialogue between past and present, theory and data. But a dialogue is a two way affair and means addressing someone other than oneself (Bradley 1985, 748; Rowlands 1985, 745-746; Shanks & Tilley 1987, 104).

This is to see archaeology as a hermeneutic, in which understanding emerges within a circle or spiral, a constant oscillation of projection:correction, part:whole, same:other, present:past (Shanks &Tilley 1987, 103-114). This is not to argue for a model testing, objective methodology as suggested for Iron Age archaeology over the last twenty years. Such attempts to separate facts from interpretation result in pushing those prejudices through which a period is perceived into the realms of unquestioned assumptions and norms. A critical, reflective archaeology faces this issue, attempting to examine the silent 'unwritten other' of the archaeological text.

To see archaeology as a hermeneutic is not merely descriptive but prescriptive, allowing the problems and weaknesses within the operation of the hermeneutic circle to be identified. Thus most Iron Age archaeology has allowed one side of the same:other, whole:part dialogue to dominate. The whole:part dialogue is a one way affair, interpretations are determined top down. Like the pyramid shaped structure of 'Celtic' society or of the settlement hierarchy they describe, the parts are determined by the whole. Further studies of such parts (religion, metalworking, animal husbandry etc) serve to add colour, to fill in what is already known; they rarely challenge. Equally, the paradoxical relationship of present:past, same:difference is lop-sided, a dialogue in which the past, the difference, is rarely given a word in edgeways.

Given that we can critically reflect on our own assumptions, why haven't Iron Age archaeologists? Perhaps it is because when we read the past, we are never free, we are members of a tradition. A way of seeing, doing and telling that is perpetuated through our academic culture. Tradition stresses our own discipline's past as we study the past. We find ourselves within a certain academic tradition irrespective of whether we are aware of it, or whether we deceive ourselves into believing we can start Iron Age archaeology anew. For our attitude does nothing to change the power of the past's Iron Age studies upon us. We can not step outside and programme ourselves afresh, if only because we are reliant on data collected and, more importantly, definitions of the subject created in the past. However traditions are not unchanging for, in reflecting on and in criticising the assumptions through which we study the Iron Age, we can learn to grasp and express the past anew. Why has our tradition been more a conservatism than a transmission? Is it because of its familiarity which 'subtly converts the anticipated into the inevitable, into the acceptable' (Shils 1981, 198)? A familiarity whose impact is doubled within Iron Age archaeology through an incestuous relationship of the familiarity of seeing the Iron Age as familiar.

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The Familiar Iron Age

For the rest of this paper I shall explore some of the varied but interrelated assumptions that have structured Iron Age archaeology, through an often confused and self-referencing interplay of 'taken for granteds' to produce a safe, familiar past. Champion (1987) has effectively summarised these, emphasising the importance of a *historical* vision of the period which stresses linear continuity with the past. An archaeology ultimately providing historical descriptions through the chronological proximity of later 'historical' periods, scattered literary references, a feeling we are directly descended from Iron Age peoples, and above all the familiar image of the 'Celts'.

Pre-Roman and 'Celtic' studies have been largely synonymous since the early eighteenth century, consequently Iron Age archaeology has never seriously questioned the notion that the Iron Age was 'Celtic'. It is telling that today our sites and texts are rarely inhabited by 'Iron Age people' but by 'Celts', people who happen to share not only the same tongue, but social organisation, religion, spirit and essence. This familiar 'Celtic' image is not just the property of archaeologists in the sense the 'Beaker Folk' were. Rather the word has resonance and meaning for the majority of Western Europeans, implying a unity which, despite attempts to unravel the specific definitions in which it might apply (eg Renfrew 1987, 225), represents a fluid mix where such different meanings over-spill and are inextricably interwoven.

The 'Celts' are at once familiar and swamp the difference of the Iron Age in two ways. Thrown up through the concerns of recent European history, a subtle mix of modernist ideologies, such as individualism, romanticism and nationalism, created the 'Celts', one of the first historically known peoples of Europe, as the first modern Europeans. A past created in *our* image (Merriman 1987). Because the Iron Age is 'Celtic' there has been little need to see for ourselves what the period was really like. A 'Celtic' Iron Age has been converted over time from the anticipated into the inevitable, into the acceptable.

The 'fact' that the period was 'Celtic' allows an 'objective' means to test the archaeological record (Clarke 1972; Crumley 1974). 'Celtic' society and religion (eg Cunliffe 1983, 1984a&b; Hingley 1984; Wait 1985) are invoked to explain away the archaeological record, that record is never used to challenge the underlying assumptions. The dialogue is one sided. The 'Celtic' context is not only powerful because it is emotive but because it is total. It allows one simultaneously to describe the structure of beliefs, while explaining the minutiae of the archaeological record; faunal remains as evidence of the feast, skulls in pits as evidence of the 'Celtic' fixation with the head. The 'Celtic' context has denied the difference of the Iron Age. Because the past is 'Celtic', there has been no need to ask for archaeological evidence of the nature of Iron Age life and society. Instead archaeology has merely served to illustrate the 'Celtic' story book.

To tackle why the Iron Age is boring, is to question a 'Celtic' Iron Age. 'Celticity' is illusory, 'Celtic Society' never existed (Collis 1985). The familiar accounts of 'Celtic' social organisation and religion are drawn from a diverse selection of literary sources. Each, individually, needs careful interpretation within its own context, even before considering the possibility of combining sources widely different in nature, time and place. 'Celtic-ness' depends on a platonic form, a constant essence despite change in external appearance and circumstances; one which ultimately rests upon nineteenth century nationalist and racist concepts of ethnicity.

However it is not just the 'Celtism' of a 'Celtic' Iron Age that serves to reinforces the notion of a familiar past. The idea of *linear continuity* both within and from the Iron Age results in a vision of the period as a backwards projection from the recent past. This privileges later European history as a source of analogy. Since the beginnings of Iron Age archaeology, the aim of extending backwards the history of known European

peoples is particularly apparent in the Eurocentric parallels used to explain the period. Analogies from Early Medieval Feudal Europe can be used without qualm, often with the explicit assumption that Europe was essentially the same before and after the Roman Interlude. Similar assumptions allow for 'continuity' in kinship structures between Early Medieval and Iron Age Europe (Gosden 1985). As telling is the marked absence of the use of ethnographic parallels within Iron Age archaeology, despite their frequent use in other branches of archaeology. That no need should be felt to ultilise such, and the violent reaction with which the few uses have met (Gosden 1985; Reynolds 1985) again emphasises the deep rooted assumption of a European Iron Age – an emphasis which has difficulties in recognising the possibility for a radically different past.

Of equal importance in limiting our understanding of the Iron Age is the *historical* nature of attempts both to write archaeology as history (ethnic 'pseudo-history with pots') and the general attraction of the written over the archaeological. Written accounts are perceived as more truthful in situations where they directly apply, a sense extended to where they do not. Written accounts are at once more attractive, immediate and familiar, offering an intimacy and detail which archaeology, supposedly, can not hope to offer. The Iron Age is fortunate in being on the 'Threshold of History'. Despite limitations, written records provide insights which dirt archaeology alone can not hope to supply (Harding 1974, 4). The result is a use of later written sources and generalised notions of the 'Celts'; it is attractive and easy. There is little need to develop, or fully ultilise, the archaeological record, nor would such a need be apparent. Within such a situation the search for 'Celtic' similarities, the assumption of 'Celtic society' and arguments for long term continuities, can be seen as an attempt to maintain the Iron Age as on the threshold of History, not take the plunge into Prehistory.

Thus the general and silent assumptions through which the Iron Age has been perceived have failed to recognise the possibility of a different kind of Iron Age. Ironically, in what is often seen as a very empirical, untheoretical branch of archaeology, we could conclude that we have been too theoretical. That our preconceptions and assumptions have over determined our views of the period, and have created a very pessimistic view of archaeology's own abilities to shed light on all aspects of the past.

A Different Iron Age

This argument stresses the need for a more critical, reflective approach to our silent preconseptions, and calls for a more contextual approach to both the meagre literary sources and the archaeology. This means a greater emphasis on the archaeological record in our encounter with the difference of the past. However, it is not just our more general assumptions about the period that create a familiar picture of the Iron Age, but also our uncritical preconceptions about the archaeology; a domestic and heavily domesticated record. We have generally perceived our data as unproblematic, assuming that both cemetery and, especially, settlement data can speak for themselves (Champion 1987, 106). This is in part reinforced by the general approach to the period, and in Britain particularly, though the sharp divide between a Neolithic/Bronze Age *monumental*, and an Iron Age *domestic* archaeological record. Also important has been the widespread assumption that the everyday is uncontroversal, passive and functional.

A domestic archaeological record is at once approachable, comprehensible and familiar. It can be seen as the product of people like ourselves (or at least our recent farming ancestors) who perhaps lived in different shaped houses and used different shaped pots, but were not that different in their needs and outlook. This identification casts the unfamiliar in European peasant culture as superstition and folklore, in non-European situations as ritual, symbolism, and an expression of a different cosmology. In archaeology such perceptions lead to common sense explanations. The reconstruction of

diet, subsistence and spatial organisation from 'rubbish' and postholes is unproblematic. In this familiar world of households, extended families, and ditches and fences to keep animals out and in, the difference of the past lies in how these units are organised. It is just the social and economic structure that is different about the past, a tribal or feudal rather than a complex state society. Rulers may change, Romans arrive and leave, yet the common people remain essentially the same. Iron Age people do little but respond, simply acting out their roles. Indeed most accounts, especially of the systemic and central place nature, offer landscapes and societies strangely depopulated – it is the settlements and sub-systems that interact, communicate and change, not the inhabitants (Barrett 1989).

But is the Iron Age archaeological record that straight forward? Are Gussage, Danebury and Little Woodbury as domesticated or familiar as would like to think? Are they not, perhaps, in their own way as different and 'other' as the Neolithic? Take for example the classic Little Woodbury type farmstead (Bersu 1940). Such farmsteads are perhaps over familiar through numerous excavation reports, accounts in textbooks, photographs and films of models and reconstructions – especially the almost obligatory views of Butser. The features of such settlements are familiar to be beyond discussion. Round houses, and enclosure ditches have obvious functions, and although justifications for interpreting four posters and pits as storage facilities are usually rehearsed, this is more for the sake of completeness as we all know and agree what they were. Indeed we can invoke scientific experiments to prove it! Little need has been felt to understand the structure of the archaeological record of the Iron Age whose large size, compared to earlier periods, creates a false sense of representative security. Where the issue has been missed, simple functional explanations are rehearsed. Thus, in discussing spatial organisation, rubbish disposal, craft activities or economy, we assume a straight forward, totalising, relationship between the archaeology and past social realities. The result is a perception of an uncontroversial domestic sphere of everyday life (Barrett 1989).

This domestic record, simply because it is domestic and not obviously ritual, is considered unproblematic. Yet recent re-examination of the record are revealing a problematic (eg Bowden & McOrmish 1987; Boast and Evans 1986; Hill 1988). When combined with ethnographic studies of space and rubbish (eg Bourdieu 1977; Hodder 1982, Moore 1986), they challenge our rational, functional assumptions, the notion of a simple representative record, and ultimately the modernist categories we blithely assume as universals.

For example, the large quantities of finds from Little Woodbury, type settlements, the rubbish of familiar daily life, can not be seen as straight forward, amorphous, rubbish. Very little of the rubbish created on a site ever entered the archaeological record. The majority of all finds on Little Woodbury type settlement come from disused used storage pits. Simple estimates of how frequently pits might have been open, and of the total quantities of material deposited each year, are surprisingly low (Hill 1988). For example using the assumed ten year life of a storage pit (Cunliffe 1984a, 557), one pit became available for infilling approximately every five years at Middle Iron Age Gussage and Winnall, and only four to five annually at Middle Iron Age Danebury (Hill 1988, 33). Densities of finds are equally very low, 1.3-0.6 rim sherds were lost per annum at Winnall Down (Hill 1988, 32). This is to stress how small our apparently large Iron Age finds assemblages are.

Deposition within archaeologically recoverable contexts was neither a daily, nor an annual, event. This has been recognised by Maltby (1985, 55) who has argued, using ethnographic analogies, that the deliberate burial of large quantities of butchery waste (of the kind common in pits and ditches) was probably associated with feasting and special occasions. Although he still invokes functional arguments to suggest why such concentrations were found in peripheral pits and enclosure ditches at Winnall Down, namely the need to deposit fowl waste away from living areas. Yet their is no *a priori* reason why this should be so (Hodder 1982, 155-167). Thus large quantities of butchery waste, probably the result of special festivities, were dumped into pits and ditches whose infilling was not a daily occurrence. This was an unusual event, if not special event, given the importance of storage on Wessex sites and the presence of human, animal and other 'special deposits' (Cunliffe 1983, 157) in about 25% of the pits. The recognition and interpretation of such deposits is controversial, although such scepticism has much to do with our expectations of a familiar, domesticated, Iron Age. Taken together, the patterning and presence of special deposits suggests pit contents are not 'normal rubbish'.

This has important implications, not least as it challenges the one to one correlation of finds to past social or economic activities. More importantly it destroys the notion of a safe, familiar, essentially modern domestic record. Put bluntly, people were doing something 'pretty weird' in Iron Age Wessex pits, which is not that incomparable to the 'oddity' of Neolithic deposition. It stresses the need to reconsider the archaeological record for the Iron Age, recognising that Iron Age people were not like ourselves. We can not continue to treat the record as unproblematic, and must stop isolating the 'other' (human remains) as 'ritual', or explaining away the less blatantly 'other' (animal and special deposits), recognising instead the implications these deposits have on the apparently 'normal rubbish' found in similar contexts.

One reason for the gulf between the archaeological outlook on the Iron Age and the Neolithic/Bronze Age is the contrast between an 'odd', ritual, and a 'normal', domestic record. It has been far easier to discuss ritual, symbolism, ideology, power through the former's monumental data. However the recognition of domestic space as text and of human agency (eg Barrett 1988; Bourdieu 1977; Hodder 1986, 1987; Moore 1986), allows a new approach which avoids the disabling split of ritual/secular, domestic/non-domestic and sees the archaeological record in a way that the *ideal* and the *practical* are inextricably linked. That is to see material culture active in, not a reflection of, the social relations, and the construction of a reality very different from our own. Pits and ditches are not convenient empty, neutral, containers in which faunal and pottery assemblages are found, but were themselves part of a symbolically constituted spatial text. Wessex may be exceptional through its pits, but, be it at Little Woodbury, Assendelver or Hodde, we should not treat our settlement record with complacency. It may be neither as familiar nor as domestic as we suppose. The realm of the everyday is not unproblematic, it is the problem.

Perhaps Iron Age studies are boring because the Iron Age really was boring. We have traditionally sought exciting stories, concentrating on Mediterranean contact, rich graves, the 'Celts' and oppida. Yet most of Europe for the period was essentially composed of 'dull' agrarian communities. When we focus on such communities, their interaction and change, the danger is still that our explanations resort to accounts which see Societies as the unit of analysis – a set of determinate forces with a life of their own. Societies have no existence independent of their members, they depend on the actions of people for their reproduction and change through the way humans routinely occupied and acted upon their world in time and space – the Everyday (Barrett 1988, 1989).

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Iron Age archaeology needs to become more 'prehistorical'. The dominant assumptions, and the prejudices which determine how we traditionally view our period have created a largely historical vision of the past where analogy to later, written, situations has always been privileged over attempts to use the arch-

aeological record itself, resulting in a very pessimistic view of what can be said from that archaeological record. Neolithic and Bronze Age archaeology, untrammelled by a 'historical' vision, has had to be more open to its data, to use very part of the record to illuminate all aspects of past culture and society, not just the bottom rungs of Hawkes' Ladder of Inference (Hawkes 1954).

Iron Age archaeology has produced a far more familiar past than that offered by earlier prehistory, and a fear that leaping into prehistory, the loss of innocence, will result in *erlebnis:* experience as event isolated from meaningful context – disconnected information (cf. Benjamin in Shanks and Tilley 1987, 18-19). In stressing the other there could be a danger of meaningless, or at least the stagnation of structuralism, but only if we fail to recognise that we live neither within a closed, nor a unique horizon. This excludes the ideal of a total account of the past, but implies a tension between what is one's own and what is alien; a paradox of otherness (Ricoeur 1981, 61-2). There is a danger of 'meaningless' if the other, the different, is over emphasised. However, this hardly seems a problem for Iron Age studies where the strong Eurocentic, modernist tradition can not be avoided.

In this our paradox of otherness is far more intriguing and complex. Iron Age people (not 'Celts') shared different cosmologies, perceptions of space, and importantly subjectivities (Hill forthcoming). Yet in projecting our Eurocentic, familiar ideal we confront a past in which there appears to be familiar objects; towns, coinage, farms and fields, and a lack of the overtly ritual which we encounter in earlier periods. But these are features *in becoming*. They may appear to be familiar to you, but Iron Age people lived in their own worlds of meaning, whose similarity is deceptive. This is to suggest that we have to envisage situations where such features can be organised into a very different world.

To be open to the possibility of a different Iron Age we need to be both critical of the complacent privileging of analogy from our later cultural development (eg Gosden 1985) as being more relevant than analogies from specific ethnographies and the generalities drawn from them. The latter can act as a challenge, a promt to help us recognise the patterns in our data that we had not expected to be there, and must not collapse Iron Age Europe into ethnographically produced generalities. It is not just a case of writing a same or an other past, ours or theirs. It is possible to envisage a Europe which is not our Europe.

A different Iron Age is to challenge the *genealogical* nature of our studies. In genealogy we look for what is ours in the past, as it is this ownership which gives the past value. As a genealogy of modern Europe, Iron Age archaeology has sought the origins of what is distinct about modern Europe in the First millennium BC, and consequently has produced visions of the period that are largely modernist fantasies. However, Foucault offers a different *genealogy* which critically investigates the origins and development of our most basic western European assumptions. By criticising our common sense understanding of the past we criticise the categories of thought whose origins we are attempting to understand (Rowlands 1987, 746). This is a two fold process, involving a critique of the current assumptions which mould a familiar past, and a positive recognition of the difference of the past by utilising the full advantages our large Iron Age data base. A critical history of Iron Age archaeology, and a critical approach to Iron Age practices of the everyday available through the record. Thus, by stressing the difference of the Iron Age we both get a fuller understanding of what happened in the past and challenge the present; subverting the legitimacy of those modernist notions and ideologies we assume to be universal truths.

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THE SUBMISSION OF THE ORKNEY ISLANDS TO CLAUDIUS: NEW EVIDENCE?

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Introduction

This paper considers the significance of a Haltern 70 Roman amphora found at the Broch of Gurness, Orkney. This type had been superseded by *c*.AD 60 and the Gurness find is a marked outlier from the main distribution. It is usually stated that the Orkney Islands were not conquered until Agricola's expedition of AD 83. However, writing in the fourth century Eutropius declared that the Orkney Islands submitted to Claudius. It is argued here that the amphora from Gurness may be intelligible most readily in this context and that the principle objections to the acceptance of the testimony of Eutropius are modern perceptions of the sophistication of the Iron age societies of northern Britain.

A Haltern 70 Amphora from the Broch of Gurness, Orkney

A sherd from a Roman amphora was found in the pre-war excavations at the Broch of Gurness on the north shore of Orkney (HY 381 268). A rim sherd, probably from the same vessel, was found unstratified in the outbuildings (Fig. 1). In the report on the excavations the amphora is identified correctly as a *Camulodunum* 185A and dated to the first or second century AD. It is stated that the type contained marine products. The stratigraphic context of the sherd from the broch interior is not clear from the published evidence (Hedges 1987a, 82, 183, Fig. 2 106; 1987b, 31; Williams 1987, 285).

Although the amphora is a *Cam* 185A (Hawkes and Hull 1947, 252, Pl. LXXI, 185A), it is better known as the Haltern 70, type 70 in Loeschke's typology of the pottery from the Augustan legionary fortress in Germany (cf, Sealey 1985, 59-65). The two most interesting aspects of the amphora for our present purposes, however, are its date and location.

The Haltern 70 first appears in the mid-first century BC (Tchernia 1986, 142) but only becomes widely known with its occurance in Augustan forts north of the Alps from the penultimate decade BC onwards (eg Fingerlin 1986, 215, Abb. 552, 61). It is found in Claudio-Neronian contexts at Colchester-Sheepen but most specialists agree that it disappeared in the mid-first century AD (Colls *et al.* 1977, 35-8, 89; Sealey 1985, 64, 167; Peacock & Williams 1986, 116). Suggestions that it continued to be produced into the Flavian-Trajanic period (Van der Werff 1984, 356; Tchernia 1986, 249-50) appear to be based on the confusion of the Haltern 70 with its successor, the London 555 or with related types (Dangréaux & Desbat 1978-88, 121) but which are distinct from the Haltern 70. Sealey argues that the London 555 appears in the 50s AD (1985, 167; Sealey & Tyers forthcoming) and a find from Neuss is thought to antedate *c*.AD 50 (Filtzinger 1972, Taf. 24, 8). The London 555 continued to be produced until the first quarter of he second century AD.

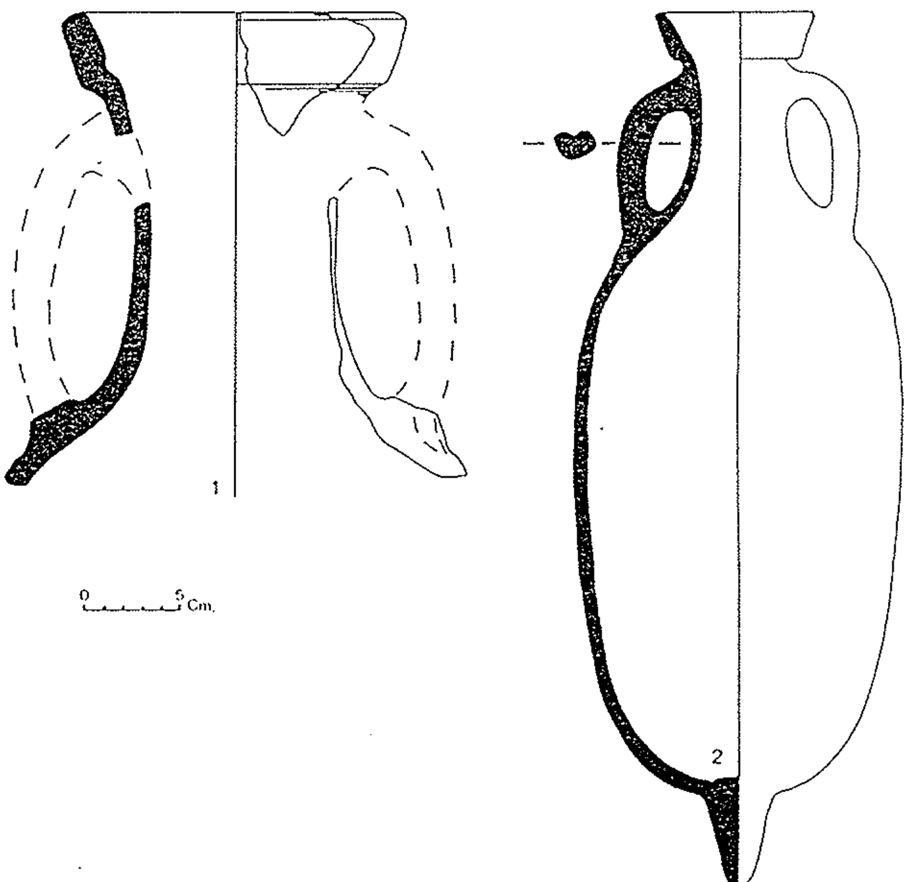

Fig. 1. *1. Haltern 70 from the Broch of Gurness. Scale 1:4 (after Hedges 1987a, Fig. 2. 106); 2. Haltern 70 type figure (from Haltern). Scale 1:8 (after Van der Werff 1984, Fig. 7, 2).*

Haltern 70 are found in Romano-British contexts at Bagendon, Canterbury London and St Albans, as well as Colchester-Sheepen, but appear to be absent from military sites founded in the late forties or early 50s AD. As yet the type is not represented amongst