

IRON AGE POTTERY FROM THE GRESS LODGE EARTH-HOUSE, STORNOWAY, LEWIS

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THE SITE

IN 1946 Mr Gilbert Holmes sent to the Hunterian Museum, University of Glasgow, a collection of pottery and animal bones obtained during excavations into the earth-house in front of Gress Lodge, near Stornoway (approx. N.G.R. NB 494419). This underground structure, situated under the lawn in front of the Lodge, was described in 1874 by Peter Liddell of Gress as a circular chamber about 9 ft. in diameter with a masonry pillar in its centre supporting the flagged roof. It was reached by a slightly curved, narrow passage (presumably lintelled) 2 ft. wide which had a 'recess of 2 ft. 6 in.' in the wall on each side just before the chamber. The chamber was full of sand which had blown in through a gap in the roof and in it were found 'large quantities of split bones and shells of the edible molluscs, among which there are a number of the large whelk (*Fusus antiquus*) which seem to have been used as lamps'.¹

Forty years later Mr Liddell described the earth-house – which was then inaccessible under sand – to the Investigators of the Royal Commission and more of the structure had apparently been discovered in the intervening years.² From the circular, pillared chamber the narrow passage continued for 40 or 50 ft. in a NW. direction towards the Lodge to reach another circular cell. 'From this a passage branched off towards the north-east, forming an angle of less than 90° with the entrance gallery, and at the end of this branch there was another circular chamber.' Mr Liddell had dug down at least 15 ft. from the surface to reach this last feature. The original entrance was only a few feet above high water mark and about 38 yds. from the front of the house.

Mr Holmes discovered an entrance in 1946 about 14–15 ft. above high water mark with a small chamber on the left a few feet in. He found no trace of the circular pillared chamber and was presumably exploring another part of what seems to have been an extensive underground structure.³ He heard from local people that when the Lodge was built (probably towards the end of the eighteenth century) a passage was found running under the house with an entrance somewhere near the public road. Mr Holmes inferred two separate occupations on the site from the relative positions of the relics he found. On the roof of the passage were charcoal fragments, fire-fractured stones and midden material and, about 8–10 ft. above this in the sand, another midden layer with bones and shells. Most of the potsherds and artifacts apparently came from the lower level, on the passage lintels, and included

¹ *P.S.A.S.*, x (1872–4), 741.

² *R.C.A.M.S.*, *Inventory of the Outer Hebrides, Skye and the Small Isles* (1928), No. 58.

³ Information from Mr Gilbert Holmes by letter (28th Oct. 1946).

some stone 'mortars' and 'smoothers' and a 'large quantity' of pottery of which the 15 sherds sent to the Museum must be a small proportion.

THE POTTERY (fig. 1: Museum numbers A.1946.1-8)

The sherds are numbered on the figure according to their museum numbers and two distinct wares are apparent. Most are hard-fired, light brown, buff or grey with numerous small white grits, while three are thinner and smoother (Nos. 5 and 6).

1. Two rim sherds of vessels with nearly vertical, slightly concave, flaring lips: hard, gritty, grey pottery with buff inside surfaces, and grey-mottled, buff or light brown and light grey exteriors. The ring-building fractures are very clear: on 1/1 the rim seems to have been added as a separate ring and this is very clear on 1/2 on which the neck ring has been worked right up over the outside of the flaring lip. No. 1/1 is lightly decorated with an incised line.

2. One of two sherds probably of the same type of flaring-rim vessels as 1 but with an applied cordon in the angle of the rim and neck: made of a similar, hard, light grey, gritty ware with light, brown-buff surfaces. The ring fracture is clear and shows that the lip ring was inserted into the split edge of the neck ring which was then drawn up over it on both faces to make a secure join (as in No. 1/2 above). The cordon was applied as a rope of clay and afterwards impressed into a zigzag design. On No. 2/2 (not illustrated) the impressed decoration is cruder and probably done with a finger-nail.

3. Rim sherd of an incised-line-decorated, everted-rim vase of hard, light brown clay with small white grits: diameter about 5.2 in.

4. Two of three cordoned wall sherds of the same type of vessels as Nos. 1 and 2, a hard, light brown, gritty ware with buff-grey exterior. No. 4/1 is a 'sandwich' ware with grey inner half and light brown outer. All are decorated with an applied, horizontal, finger-pressed cordon.

5. Two wall sherds of smoother fabric. No. 5/1 is a buff-coloured ware with a smooth exterior surface decorated with a row of light finger-nail impressions: 5/2 is a dark-grey, hard, smooth-surfaced ware slightly burnished on the exterior.

6. A fine, thin sherd of light grey-brown hard clay with tiny white grits: the exterior is smooth, slipped and dark grey with a decoration of lightly channelled lines: diameter about 5½ in.

7/1. A base sherd of a ring-built jar with a non-footed base of a similar ware to the cordoned sherds described above; a light, orange-brown, sandy textured clay with small white grits.

7/2. Originally classified as a base this sherd now seems as likely to be an unusual rim with an internal flange which probably supported a lid: a similar example comes from Bragar, Lewis.¹ The ware is a very hard 'sandwich', light orange-brown in its outer half and light grey inside with many small quartz grits. One feature may favour its being a base rather than a rim, however. The light brown outer half of the clay does not extend into the 'flange' but runs straight up to the broken top of the

¹ I am indebted to Mr R. B. K. Stevenson of the National Museum for the suggested diagnosis of the sherd and for the Bragar parallel: the Bragar sherd is No. HR 601 in the Museum's collections.

supposed rim. This suggests that the 'flange' was in fact buried inside a thick base plate and cut off from oxygen during the firing.

8. Small handle belonging to an incised-line-decorated pot of the same hard, light grey ware with light brown surfaces as the cordoned sherds. The broader end

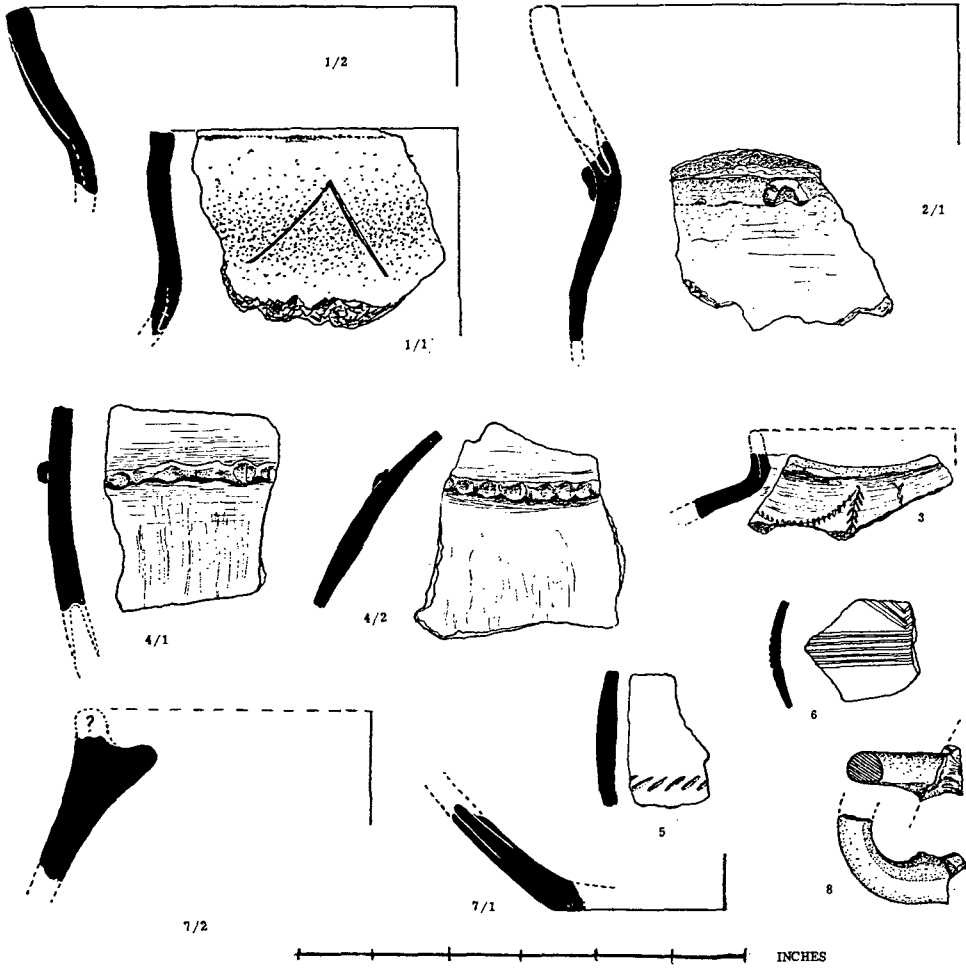


FIG. 1. The pottery from Gress Lodge earth-house

of the handle has a projecting tongue of clay where it was bonded into the wall of the vessel. The fractured surface here is at a marked angle to the alignment of the handle itself and gives the impression that it was attached either horizontally or diagonally to an inwardly sloping part of the pot wall. The horizontal position is favoured too by the distinctly D-shaped section of the handle: if it was attached in this way the flatter surface would be downwards and provide a better grip.

DISCUSSION

It seems likely that all the coarser pottery described above came from the lower of the two midden deposits found at the Gress Lodge earth-house and that it was part of the debris lying on the lintels of the passage. Thus the material must have been deposited when the lintels were exposed or covered with only a little sand, assuming that 'on top of the passage' means more or less directly on the lintels. It may be assumed that the roof of an earth-house passage was designed to be buried several feet underground, both for concealment and to prevent sand and rain filtering in. Also the chamber was presumably higher than the passage and must also have been completely buried. Thus it seems quite likely that any midden material on top of the passage lintels was deposited when the earth-house was being built and before the trench containing the passage had been filled in. The pottery could thus have belonged to the builders of the earth-house and this makes it of considerable interest. It is a pity that its precise relationship with the structure is not completely certain.

Most of the sherds fit well into the later phase of the Hebridean Iron Age. The distinctive pot with a high, flaring, slightly concave and nearly vertical rim, sometimes with an applied cordon at the junction with the neck, seems to be a degenerate version of the well known Cletraval pottery style. This consists of globular and situlate jars with short, sharply everted rims and ornamented with a horizontal zigzag cordon with – in the classic form – concentric channelled arches above this¹; they are associated with the broch builders on Tiree and with some of the wheelhouses in North and South Uist. Pottery very similar to the Gress material was found in Dun Cuier, Barra² and at A Cheardach Mhor wheelhouse (Phase 3) in South Uist.³ The stratigraphy at the latter site supports the assumed degeneration of Cletraval ware to the Gress form for which the name Dun Cuier ware has been suggested.⁴ The pottery at the Allasdale wheelhouse seems to represent a halfway stage between the two styles.⁵

DATING AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

At A Cheardach Mhor (Phase 3) and Dun Cuier the pottery was associated with ornamental-headed bone pins which are unlikely to have reached Atlantic Scotland before the fourth or fifth centuries A.D.⁶ Dun Cuier indeed had a composite bone comb which probably belongs to the sixth or even seventh century but this was probably contemporary with the latest pottery at the site, a coarse plain ware quite distinct from the Dun Cuier style. At Allasdale the half-formed style was not accompanied by these distinctive pins but this need not mean much since all bone at that site had been destroyed, probably by the acid soil. One may assume that fully developed Dun Cuier ware had evolved more or less by the time the bone pins appeared in the Hebrides, probably by the fifth century, and that the Gress Lodge material is of a similar age. The fine channelled sherd from the earth-house is

¹ *Antiquity*, xxxix (1965), fig. 1, p. 269; *P.S.A.S.*, xciii (1959-60), fig. 6, p. 145; *P.P.S.*, xiv (1948), Pl. VIII, p. 62.

² *P.S.A.S.*, lxxxix (1955-6), 290-328.

³ *P.S.A.S.*, xciii (1959-60), 135-73.

⁴ *P.P.S.*, xxxi (1965), Section v, 114 ff.

⁵ *P.S.A.S.*, lxxxvii (1952-3), 80-105.

⁶ *P.P.S.*, xxi (1955), 282-94.

distinct and perhaps later. It has no parallels in the usual Iron Age wares of the area.

The earth-house itself may thus have been constructed in the fifth or fourth century if its relationship to the pottery is that suggested above. It is unlikely to be much earlier as the development and chronology of Hebridean Iron Age wares from 100 B.C. to A.D. 500 are now reasonably well known.¹ From the incomplete descriptions available the earth-house is not remotely similar to the small souterrains associated with two earlier Hebridean wheelhouses² and the pillared chamber does not seem to have been noted in other comparable Hebridean structures.³ Neither does the group of souterrains around the Firth of Tay resemble it in any way.⁴ The clearest analogies are in fact with Orkney where pillared earth-houses – with orthostats in their chambers supporting flattish roofs of overlapping flags (*not* beehive corbelling) – are quite common: Rennibister and Grainbank are good examples.⁵ It may be that Gress Lodge illustrates a further and later example of the transplantation of a dry-stone structure design from the northern islands to the Hebrides analogous to the adoption in the west of the solid-based broch and the wheelhouse two or three centuries earlier.⁶ If so Gress may also exhibit another example of what seems to be a characteristic phenomenon in Atlantic Iron Age Scotland wherein an exotic dry-stone structure is adopted by an established local population. There is no doubt that the pottery style is local and quite alien to Orkney.

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¹ *P.P.S.*, xxxi (1965), 118: The development of Hebridean Iron Age pottery is fully discussed in the excavation report of the Vaul broch in "*P.S.A.S.*, c. (forthcoming)". There is now a little evidence from that site that the Dun Cuier style may have evolved slightly earlier than suggested above, perhaps in the third century A.D.

² Clettraval, North Uist (*P.P.S.*, xiv, loc. cit.) and Allasadale, Barra (*P.S.A.S.*, lxxxvii, loc. cit.).

³ For example, Nos. 497, 529 and 556 in the *R.C.A.M.S. Inventory*; many of the 'earth-houses' listed by the Commission in North and South Uist are of course a totally different type of circular structure, now known as wheelhouses.

⁴ Wainwright, F. T., *The Souterrains of Southern Pictland* (1963), 3-9 and also in *Antiquity* xxvii (1953), 219-32.

⁵ The Royal Commission's *Inventory of Orkney* (1946), Nos. 325 and 409.

⁶ *P.P.S.*, xxxi (1965), 112-13 and 127-30.