

## A cordoned urn from NE Scotland

by J B Kenworthy

Among the objects which survived the fire in 1953 at Finzean House, Birse, Aberdeenshire (NGR NO 591934), is a large fragment from a cordoned urn. It was apparently found in the last century and had been in the gun-room as far back as can be remembered. No more of the fragment was present in recent times, and it is unknown if the vessel was fragmentary when discovered or not. There is no label, and in the absence of any other record it is impossible to be sure of its provenance, beyond reasonable certainty that it will have come from the estates of the Farquharsons of Finzean or nearby, since the family were not collectors of antiquities; a suggestion as to a possible provenance will be made below. The fragment remains at Finzean House.

The portion of the urn which has been preserved (fig 1) is 210 mm in maximum width by 265 mm maximum height, and includes part of the rim but not of the base. This might suggest that, as was often the case, the pot had been inverted over a cremation. The fabric is coarse and soft, with much grit up to 4 mm across. The mean wall thickness is 13 mm. The exterior is reddish, the core is dark brown, while the internal face varies from buff to very dark (this may be the result of heating, but it is uncertain whether this is modern or ancient). The external surface seems to have been wiped before the pot was decorated, leaving grits standing proud.

There are three applied cordons, about 25 mm, 130 mm and 195 mm below the rim; this probably represents the total present on the complete vessel, judging from the form of the present fragment and from complete examples from NE Scotland. The rim is simple, with a slight internal bevel. Neither this, nor the interior below the rim, is decorated.

External decoration is with an impressed two-strand Z-twist cord (or coarse string). Two somewhat irregular horizontal lines run about 15 mm apart just below the lip, the lower of these at times impinging on the uppermost cordon and being faint in places. At the left hand edge of the fragment this lower line shows an overlap. The area between the uppermost ('rim') cordon

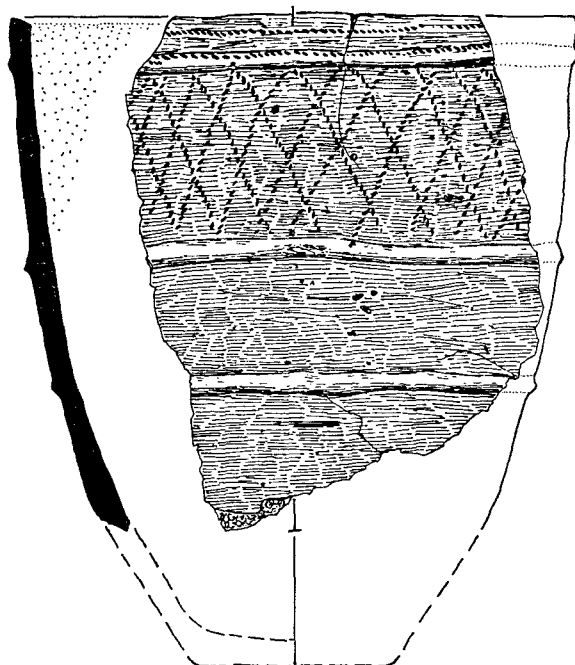


FIG 1 Cordoned urn at Finzean House, Birse, with proposed reconstruction (scale 1 : 4)

and the central ('girth') cordon bears an acute-angled lattice, apparently impressed with the same cord. It lacks bounding horizontal lines. The upper left- to lower right-hand elements have been impressed first, and are smeared in places.

Sufficient of the vessel remains to allow a reasonable estimate of the external rim diameter, which was *c* 300 mm. The height may be inferred to have been around 340 mm to 350 mm.

This is not the place to discuss the cinerary urns of NE Scotland in detail, but a few comments may be offered. The local character of the vessel is fairly certain: it fits well into the pattern of cordoned urns in NE Scotland. Here cord-decorated examples are common, although incised patterns, and a combination of the two techniques, appear also. Three-cordon urns are infrequent, most similar urns lacking the rim cordon but having the girth and body cordons; the pattern of decoration on these is, however, comparable. Beside this simpler series, there are vessels with multiple cordons, or more developed rim forms, often with ornament on and inside the rim. In one form the position of the cordons is marked (at least for the upper part of the pot) by a corresponding depression on the interior, and this is at times difficult to separate from the

collared urn form, and some interaction between the two types is probable. There are at present no good means of defining a chronological sequence within the cordoned urn tradition in the NE, although a few associations show that, as a whole, they belong to the later part of the 'native' early bronze age.

#### POSSIBLE PROVENANCE OF THE FINZEAN URN

Among the many otherwise unrecorded finds from the area which were included by the compilers of the Object Name Book (ONB) for the first edition of the 6 in Ordnance Survey map, is one from Tomfull, parish of Lumphanan, Aberdeenshire (NGR NJ 56090510): 'While trenching and reclaiming the land were found two plain Urns, containing what was supposed to be human bones and Ashes, both urns and their contents were taken away by the proprietor when dug up - viz in 1857' (ONB 1867, 32).

The proprietor of the land was Farquharson of Finzean. Allowing for some inaccuracy of memory on the part of ONB's informants, well attested in some cases, the fact that the 'urns' are described as 'plain' may be apposite. The term 'plain' may mean no more than that they lacked the more profuse decoration of food vessels or beakers, rather than that they were totally undecorated and without cordons. Proof is, of course, entirely impossible, but there is at least a chance that the Tomfull find and our fragment may be linked, the fragment being all that survives of an urn whose fabric is extremely friable even now.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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#### REFERENCE

ONB 1867 MS Object Name Book, Aberdeenshire no 59 (1867). OS Archaeology Division, Edinburgh.